

288 PAGES

BOOK CASTLE, INC.

\$1.00

ISAAC

ASIMOV'S

SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGY

FALL-WINTER 1979

CC 02/48

VOLUME 2 \$2.25

16

stories by:

**Isaac
Asimov**

**Randall
Garrett**

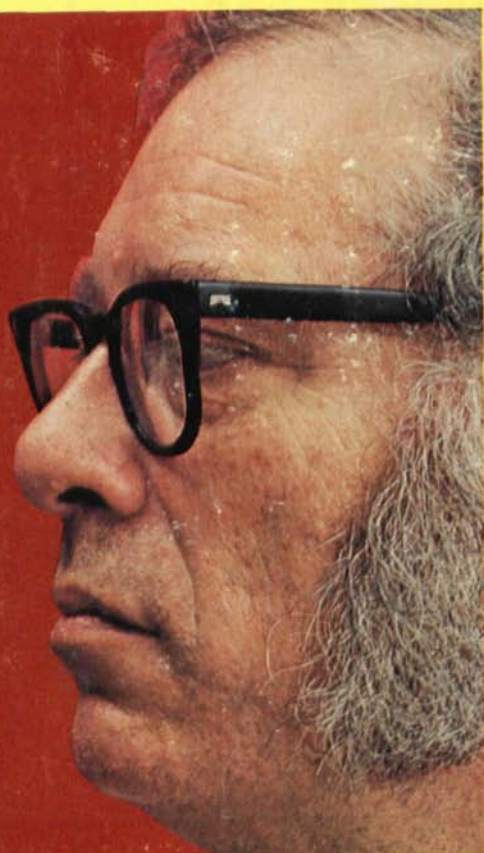
**Martin
Gardner**

**Barry B.
Longyear**

**Jo
Clayton**

**F. Paul
Wilson**

and others



93



71483 02748

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DAVIS PUBLICATION



IT'S SO
NEW—
WE'RE
ONLY ON
OUR 4TH
ISSUE!

And when it's
by Isaac Asimov
it's just got to
be lots of
SF adventure
and fun.



The Fall 1979 Edition
—In it, among other exciting
things, you'll enjoy "The Things That
Are Gods," (a tale of the Traveller in
Black) by John Brunner; "Hellhole,"
by David Gerrold; "The Starshow," by
Barry B. Longyear; and "The Jaren,"
by Frederick Longbeard.

SFAN2

- ☐ Enclosed is \$1.95 plus 45¢ handling/shipping
(total of \$2.40) for the Fall '79 issue (#4) of
ASIMOV'S SF ADVENTURE Magazine.

Name _____ please print

Address _____ Apt. No. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A



The Stainless Steel Rat
Wants You—
Paul Alexander, artist

Now you can get
full-color posters
of ASIMOV'S SF
ADVENTURE
MAGAZINE
covers.

No overprinting on
posters. Suitable
for framing. Be-
cause they are en-
graver's proofs,
each has fine color
quality. Size: 10³/₄"
x 16¹/₄". One for
\$1.95; 2 for \$3.70;
3 for \$4.50; 4 for
\$5.40.

B

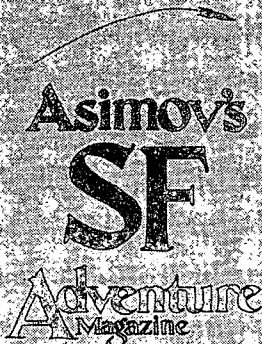


Keepersmith—
Paul Alexander, artist

C



Starschool on Hell—
Paul Alexander, artist



D



Hellhole—
Stephen Fabian, artist

ASIMOV'S SF ADVENTURE MAGAZINE
380 Lexington Ave., N.Y.C., NY 10017

☐ Enclosed is \$ _____ Send these cover prints:
_____ "A"; _____ "B"; _____ "C"; _____ "D"

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Add \$1.00 for postage outside the U.S.A.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HOW TO ORDER—IT'S SPANKING NEW!

Asimov's
SF Adventure
Magazine

380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Chock-full of stories with lots of illustrations—
the Fall '79 edition will provide you SF excitement and fun!

- ☐ Enclosed is \$1.95 plus 45¢ handling/shipping
(total of \$2.40) for the Fall '79 issue (#4) of
ASIMOV'S SF ADVENTURE Magazine.

Name _____ please print

Address _____ Apt. No. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

FOR MORE DETAILS SEE AD ON COVER 2

SFAN2

How to order a subscription to
ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

- ☐ Enclosed is \$7.50 for 6 issues (outside USA & poss. \$8.50).
☐ Enclosed is \$15.00 for 12 issues (1 year). (Outside USA & poss. \$17.00)
I prefer to use my MASTER CHARGE or VISA credit card. HOWEVER, only
these longer terms are available:
☐ 1 year (12 issues) \$15.00 ☐ 2 years (24 issues) \$29.00

Credit
Card # _____

Expiration date _____

Signature _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ Zip _____

H9H049

Mail To: _____

**Isaac
Asimov's**
**SCIENCE
FICTION
MAGAZINE**
**BOX 1855 GPO
NY, NY 10001**

**Please allow 6 to 8 weeks
for delivery of first issue.**

ISAAC ASIMOV'S MARVELS OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 2

ISAAC ASIMOV'S MARVELS OF SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by
George Scithers

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC.
380 LEXINGTON AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FIRST PRINTING

Copyright © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 78-60795

Printed in the U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT NOTICES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is hereby made for permission to reprint the following:

In the Country of the Blind, No One Can See by Melisa Michaels; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

Proud Rider by Barry B. Longyear; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

The Three Robots of Professor Tinker by Martin Gardner; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

On the Q167 File by John M. Ford; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

Softly Touch the Stranger's Mind by E. Amalia Andujar; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

The Last Master of Limericks by Garry R. Osgood; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

A Bait of Dreams by Jo Clayton; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

Nothing for Nothing by Isaac Asimov; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

The Adventure of the Global Traveler by Anne Lear; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

A Time for Terror by Frederick Longbeard; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

Against a Crooked Stile by Nancy Kress; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of Virginia Kidd, Literary Agent.

To Fill the Sea and Air by F. Paul Wilson; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

One Rejection Too Many by Patricia Nurse; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

On the Way by Conway Conley; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

The Castaways by Jeanne Dillard; © 1978 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of the author.

The Napoli Express by Randall Garrett; © 1979 by Davis Publications, Inc.; reprinted by permission of Blackstone Literary Agency.

CONTENTS

8	EDITORIAL: HINTS	Isaac Asimov
12	In the Country of the Blind, No One Can See	Melisa Michaels
30	Proud Rider	Barry B. Longyear
56	The Three Robots of Professor Tinker	Martin Gardner
57	On the Q167 File	John M. Ford
61	Softly Touch the Stranger's Mind	E. Amalia Andujar
68	The Last Master of Limericks	Garry R. Osgood
86	A Bait of Dreams	Jo Clayton
118	Nothing for Nothing	Isaac Asimov
130	The Adventure of the Global Traveller	Anne Lear
140	A Time for Terror	Frederick Longbeard
166	Against a Crooked Stile	Nancy Kress
188	To Fill the Sea and Air	F. Paul Wilson
206	One Rejection Too Many	Patricia Nurse
210	On the Way	Conway Conley
217	The Castaways	Jeanne Dillard
220	The Napoli Express	Randall Garrett

EDITORIAL: HINTS

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

Every once in a short while I get a letter from some eager young would-be writer asking me for some "hints" on the art of writing science fiction.

The feeling I have is that my correspondents think there is some magic formula jealously guarded by the professionals, but that since I'm such a nice guy I will spill the beans if properly approached.

Alas, there's no such thing, no magic formula, no secret tricks, no hidden short-cuts.

I'm sorry to have to tell you that it's a matter of hard work over a long period of time. If you know of any exceptions to this, that's exactly what they are—exceptions.

There are, however, some general principles that could be useful, to my way of thinking, and here they are.

1) *You have to prepare for a career as a successful science fiction writer—as you would for any other highly specialized calling.*

First, you have to learn to use your tools, just as a surgeon has to learn to use his.

The basic tool for any writer is the English language, which means you must develop a good vocabulary and brush up on such prosaic things as spelling and grammar.

There can be little argument about vocabulary, but it may occur to you that spelling and grammar are just frills. After all, if you write great and gorgeous stories, surely the editor will be delighted to correct your spelling and grammar.

Not so! He (or she) won't be.

Besides, take it from an old war-horse, if your spelling and grammar are rotten, you won't be writing a great and gorgeous story. Someone who can't use a saw and hammer doesn't turn out stately furniture.



Even if you've been diligent at school, have developed a vocabulary, can spell "sacrilege" and "supersede" and never say "between you and I" or "I ain't never done nothing," that's still not enough. There's the subtle structure of the English sentence and the artful construction of the English paragraph. There is the clever interweaving of plot, the handling of dialog, and a thousand other intricacies.

How do you learn that? Do you read books on how to write, or attend classes on writing, or go to writing conferences? These are all of inspirational value, I'm sure, but they won't teach you what you really want to know.

What *will* teach you is the careful reading of the masters of English prose. This does not mean condemning yourself to years of falling asleep over dull classics. Good writers are invariably fascinating writers—the two go together. In my opinion, the English writers who most clearly use the correct word every time and who most artfully and deftly put together their sentences and paragraphs are Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and P.G. Wodehouse.

Read them, and others, but with attention. They represent your schoolroom. Observe what they do and try to figure out why they do it. It's no use other people explaining it to you; until you see it for yourself and it becomes part of you, nothing will help.

But suppose that no matter how you try, you can't seem to absorb the lesson. —Well, it may be that you're not a writer. It's no disgrace. You can always go on to take up some slightly inferior profession like surgery or the Presidency of the United States. It won't be as good, of course; but we can't all scale the heights.

Second, for a science fiction writing career, it is not enough to know the English language; you also have to know science. You may not want to use much science in your stories; but you'll have to know it anyway, so that what you do use, you don't mis-use.

This does not mean you have to be a professional scientist, or a science major at college. You don't even have to go to college. It does mean, though, that you have to be willing to study science on your own, if your formal education has been weak in that direction.

It's not impossible. One of the best writers of hard science fiction is Fred Pohl, and he never even finished high school. Of course, there are very few people who are as bright as Fred, but you can write considerably less well than he does and still be pretty good.

Fortunately, there is more good, popular-science writing these days than there was in previous generations, and you can learn a great deal, rather painlessly, if you read such science fiction writers as L. Sprague de Camp, Ben Bova, and Poul Anderson in their non-fictional moods—or even Isaac Asimov.

What's more, professional scientists are also writing effectively for the public these days, as witness Carl Sagan's magnificent books. And there's always *Scientific American*.

Third, even if you know your science and your writing, it is still not likely that you will be able to put them together from scratch. You will have to be a diligent reader of science fiction itself to learn the conventions and the tricks of the trade—how to interweave background and plot, for instance.

2) *You have to work at the job.*

The final bit of schooling is writing itself. Nor must you wait till your preparation is complete. The act of writing is itself part of the preparation.

You can't completely understand what good writers do until you try it yourself. You learn a great deal when you find your story breaking apart in your hands—or beginning to hang together. Write from the very beginning, then, and keep on writing.

3) *You have to be patient.*

Since writing is itself a schooling, you can't very well expect to sell the first story you write, (Yes, I know Bob Heinlein did it, but he was Bob Heinlein. You are only you.)

But then, why should that discourage you? After you finished the first grade at school, you weren't through, were you? You went on to the second grade, then the third, then the fourth, and so on.

If each story you write is one more step in your literary education, a rejection shouldn't matter. [Editors don't reject writers; they reject pieces of paper that have been typed on. Ed.] The next story will be better, and the next one after that still better, and eventually—

But then why bother to submit the stories? If you don't, how can you possibly know when you graduate? After all, you don't know which story you'll sell.

You might even sell the first. You almost certainly won't, but you just might.

Of course, even after you sell a story, you may fail to place the

next dozen, but having done it once, it is quite likely that you will eventually do it again, if you persevere.

But what if you write and write and write and you don't seem to be getting any better and all you collect are printed rejection slips? Once again, it may be that you are not a writer and will have to settle for a lesser post such as that of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

4) *You have to be reasonable.*

Writing is the most wonderful and satisfying task in the world, but it does have one or two insignificant flaws. Among those flaws is the fact that a writer can almost never make a living at it.

Oh, a few writers make a lot of money—they're the ones we all hear about. But for every writer who rakes it in, there are a thousand who dread the monthly rent-bill. It shouldn't be like that, but it is.

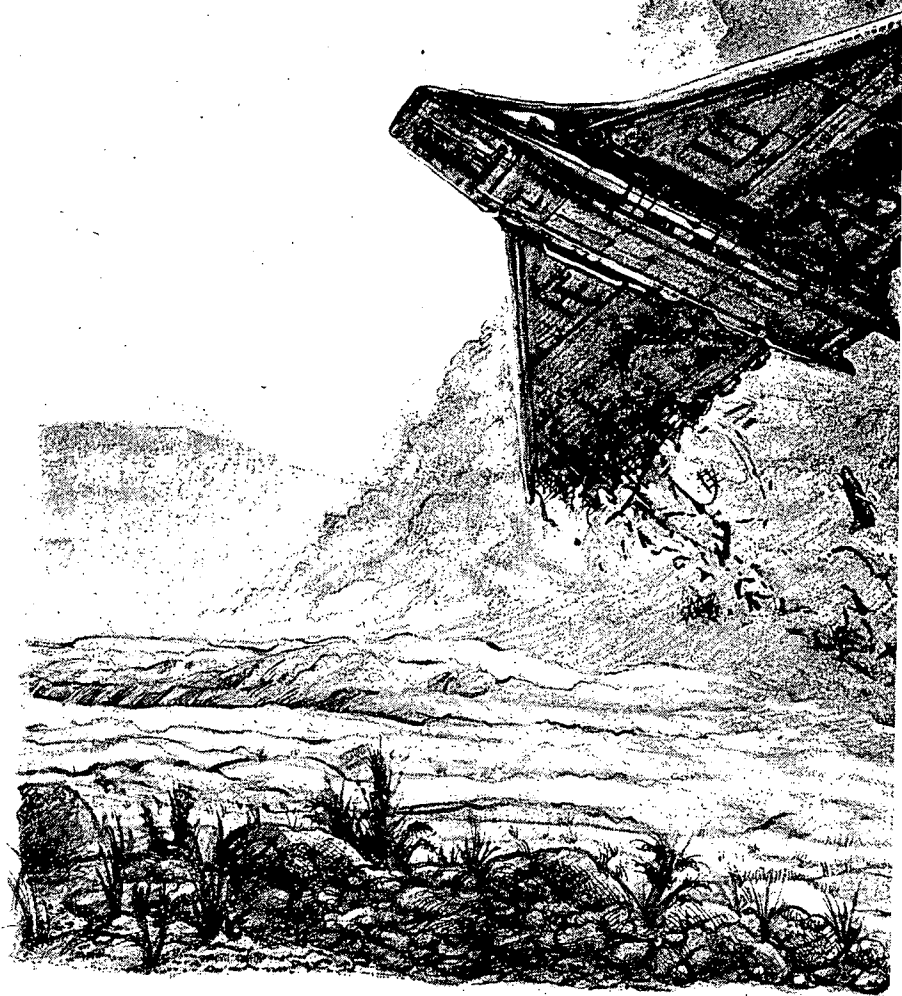
Take my case. Three years after I sold my first story, I reached the stage of selling everything I wrote, so that I had become a successful writer. Nevertheless, it took me seventeen more years as a *successful* writer before I could actually support myself in comfort on my earnings as a writer.

So while you're trying to be a writer, make sure you find another way of making a decent living—and don't quit your job after you make your first sale.

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND, NO ONE CAN SEE

by Melisa Michaels

art: Karl Kofoed





Ms. Michaels is art director of Pennyfarthing Press, a new SF reprint house. She also works as a typesetter, and studies art and sciences in a local college. In the past, she's been an actress, factory worker, singer, and silversmith, as well as the usual list of office jobs. She lives in Berkeley with her husband, her daughter, thirteen fish, four cats, and a dog. This story is her first prose sale.

Allyson Hunter lay nestled in her protective foam, listening to the howling storm outside. She looked like a fragile china doll packed for shipping. The fragility was deceptive. Pale, perfect skin; wide, sky-blue eyes shaded by wary lashes; pink-tinged, high-boned cheeks—but under the china perfection was something sterner and stronger than china dolls. Her eyes glittered like ice. Her mouth was set in lines of habitual determination. Even the casual elegance of her posture was as dangerous as a coiled spring. She waited.

She couldn't see past the foam to tell how her sisters were, and there was nothing she could do till it melted but wait and listen. At least there was no fire; the pilot must have jettisoned the fuel pods in time. Otherwise the foam would have melted within seconds of impact, to give survivors the best chance of escape. In the absence of fire it took several minutes, to ensure an adequate, enforced rest period and decrease the chances of severe traumatic shock.

Old as the skimmer was, it was still a good craft. There'd been no guarantees either way. If they hadn't gone off-course, if the sandstorm hadn't come up . . . She shivered, listening to the screaming wind. Outside the skimmer's hull the fine red Martian dust raged against metal. Allyson had seen junk craft brought in after a sandstorm. The skimmer would look newly polished, scoured of all paint and identifying markings. Like a huge, winged mirror.

At least it would help the search craft find them. Assuming any pilots dared bring search craft out over the high desert after them. Against the threat of sandstorms, they might not.

The skimmer had been doing fine—the pilot called back to say the radio was out, and to ask if Allyson or her sisters had per-

sonal coms that might be affecting the directional finders—but they'd been floating soft and easy in the terraformed Martian atmosphere like a beautiful big blue bird. And then the sandstorm hit.

It must have come out of the east, behind them. One moment they were gliding silently over the Martian plains, and Allyson was just about to ask Kim if it didn't look a lot like high desert down there; maybe they were more off course than the pilots realized. . . .

Then the skimmer bucked and dived and she had time for nothing but strapping in, hanging on, and hoping. One of the pilots shouted a warning, but his words were lost in the screaming wind. The pilots fought it as best they could, but they hadn't a chance. Even in a modern craft they couldn't have bucked those winds.

One last stomach-churning dive . . . the wrenching sound of metal against rocks . . . a brief ear-shattering wail as the skimmer's starboard wing ripped off . . . a tumble of red and metal and breaking . . . and the silent, soft crash foam spilled out and built up around Allyson, enveloping her before the skimmer was still.

Since then, only the sound of the wind, and waiting. At first she called to her sisters, but neither they nor the pilots answered. There was nothing more she could do. The skimmer was canted at a weird, impossible angle and it shook now and then with the fury of the winds, but seemed overall steady. They must have landed on rocky ground, but at least not hanging over the edge of a crater or chasm. The pilots were good; if they had any choice in landing places, they'd have taken the best available. But they probably hadn't been able to see through the sand.

If only they or her sisters had answered her calls! She was afraid to call again, now. Her sisters should be protected by the same crash foam that saved her. If it had failed . . . she didn't want to think about that. Safer to think of the pilots, strapped into their cockpit seats. There were a dozen reasons why they might not have answered; they might not have heard her. Or they might be injured. Or it might not have occurred to them that their silence would frighten her.

They thought of her and her sisters more as furniture than people. Cargo. They'd even said that, and then stared at each other with their dark shadowed eyes, and one of them had smiled and said with polite indifference, "Excuse me. I mean clones." Because they knew she was listening. So they knew she had some

feelings, anyway. But they still might not think of her now.

"Don't ever forget what you are; no one else will." That was one of the earliest lessons of her childhood. "Nobody else is going to forget for a second; so always be one jump ahead of them. If you're ever to be accepted as people, you'll have to act twice as human as natural-borns; and that only in the ways they respect. No human frailties. Just strengths."

She could almost hear Barbara saying that. And she remembered the first time she'd heard it. Allyson, Kim, and Rebecca were very young; they came in crying from some encounter with the local natural-borns, and listened patiently to that lecture from Barbara. Rebecca had cried, "We can't *do* that! You don't know . . ."

But Barbara interrupted, with that soft, sad smile that looked like a mirror of them thirty years from now, and said, "Rebecca. I know exactly what you can do, and what you can't do. And I know how hard it is."

None of them understood, then, how true that was. But later, when they understood genetics, they began to guess. And later still, they knew how much of it was more determination than truth. But they had inherited Barbara's determination, and it stood them in good stead.

It was only by accident of nature, or lab procedure, or some unknown that they had been allowed to live at all. When they were scheduled for cerebral death, their EEGs were automatically checked; and they showed the strange, doubled pattern of potential espers.

Even clone espers were needed to guide and communicate with the starships on their long voyages, so they were spared. The process was not yet then sophisticated enough to determine how strong their latent talent was, or they still would have been destroyed; since as it turned out the talent was weak at best.

But they lived. Clones with the same level of talent were now automatically murdered. The testing equipment had been considerably refined. But Allyson and her sisters lived. And Barbara, their donor-sister, the woman whose genes they carried and who had fought for the right to raise them as her children once their right to live had been established, had instilled in them her own fierce horror of the entire cloning industry as it was used today.

Because it led to questions like: why bother protecting endangered species? Just clone some extras. And why not indulge in dangerous, deadly pastimes? Sunjamming and high-diving and race-driving and all the other risk-filled enterprises man's

sensation-hungry mind could conjure. It was no more risk than driving a car was a century earlier. If you got mangled, your clones would supply new body parts. If you died, you died. And if you were lucky, you were one whose brain could be transplanted into the body of one of your clones and you'd be immortal!

But your clone wouldn't. He never had a chance. And nobody thought twice about it; they were only clones, after all. Destroy one, make another. No problem. It wasn't as if they were real people, after all.

So Allyson and her sisters spent their lives trying to be real people; what they among themselves called natural-borns. And they were reminded, every day in a dozen little ways, that they weren't real people. Everything about them was stamped "clone." Their IDs, their credit cards, even their bodies. At least that was on the soles of their feet, where people couldn't see it all the time. But it was there. And it was like being a carbon copy of a real person; a copy okay for certain functions but not nearly as good as the original.

She should have expected Frank and Todd Lewis's reaction when the three of them came into the little flight office with their request that the brothers fly them and their skimmer to Viking's Rest. Three identical, carbon-copy women; their sky-blue eyes identically wary; their faces identically tense; even their clothing and sun-burned hair identical—they didn't have to show their IDs to be known for what they were when they travelled together.

They dressed alike as a gesture almost of defiance. Natural-borns never noticed the freckles on Kim's nose; or the way Rebecca's hair stuck up in a little cowlick in back; or that Allyson was always the one who took charge. They just saw three identical women, and called them clones. All interactions were governed by that. If the three of them dressed alike, it was like a shout of pride. They made no effort to conceal what they were; and they expected the reactions they got.

But when Allyson first saw Frank and Todd Lewis she thought, just for a moment, that they were clones, too. Heart in her throat, she stared with wild unexpected hope at their identical faces—and immediately realized she was wrong. They were too comfortable, too confident, too secure. Nothing stamped "clone" could be so self-assured. So proud.

She knew at once why their shadowed eyes went narrow with unease when they saw her and her sisters. Still, it hurt. She said, before they could, "You're twins! How fascinating; I've never met

identical twins before."

One of them lifted an eyebrow and both of them smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile. If she'd thought she could alleviate their dislike by recognizing its cause, she was mistaken. They were no more pleased she could tell they weren't clones than they would have been if the skimmer could, and no more concerned for her feelings. She wasn't a person. She was just a clone.

She sighed and shifted in the crash foam, trying to get free of a particularly binding safety belt. The wind was definitely abating now, and the foam was receding. In a few moments she would be free to see how the others had fared in the crash.

She was working her way out of the safety harness when the door from the cockpit opened and one of the pilots stepped through. He towered over her seat next to the doorway, his long frame bent a little to keep from bumping his head. There was something wild and terrible in his eyes as he surveyed the cargo hold, but his voice when he spoke was casual and steady. "You all right?" he asked.

"I am," she said. He could see past the foam to where her sisters were strapped in their seats. She kept her voice steady and met his eyes as she asked, "Are my sisters alive?"

He glanced at her and then past her, over the foam. "One is," he said. His voice was unexpectedly gentle. There was something like fear or terrible pain in his eyes. "I can't tell about the other. Here, let me help you out of your harness. Then you can check on them. I've got to get my brother out; he's hurt." He bent over the foam to release Allyson's straps, touching her body as indifferently as he would a box of cargo. In that moment she hated him. But it showed only in the darkening of her eyes.

"There's a medikit in the compartment in front," she said.

"I found it," he said. When her straps were loose he stood back, surveying the odd angle of the deck and the melting foam. "What a mess," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

She was disentangling herself from the straps, trying to stand up, and she spoke without thinking. "You've been in worse," she said.

Those implacable brown eyes returned to her face, impaling her. She stared, oddly frightened. "How would you know?" he asked.

She managed a shrug and a tentative smile. People reacted even worse to espers than to clones. Any sign of talent was always taken for full telepathy. "A guess," she said. "You're a pilot

with quite a reputation. You don't get that without a few mishaps along the way."

He watched her a moment longer before he answered. "Yeah," he said, and suddenly all interest in her was gone. "You're right. See to your, um, sisters, okay? If you need the medikit, let me know. I'll be in front; the storm's just about over, and I want to see if we can get out of here and get some signal out for the search planes. I don't suppose this crate has an ADS?"

"Autodirection sender? No, I don't think so."

"It figures." He turned away, but on impulse she caught his arm to stop him.

The words were harder to phrase than she'd expected. But she'd wanted all her life to say them to someone else; and his indifference angered her enough to say them: "Which one are you? I can't tell you apart." She could, but he had no way of knowing that.

The sardonic twist of his lips showed he knew exactly why she asked. But he said simply, "Todd," and turned away. So he was better at insults than she. Because he didn't bother to ask which one she was. He didn't care.

"Allyson?" With a guilty start, she let Todd go and turned toward the opposite wall where her sisters sat in the melting foam. Rebecca was awake and watching her, her eyes puzzled. "Allyson, are you all right?"

Todd disappeared into the cockpit and Allyson slipped and slid across the foamy floor to Rebecca's side. Near Rebecca, Kim sprawled limp and lifeless in her harness. The side of her head was covered with blood. Half her face was ruined. The other half was still a perfect replica of Allyson's and Rebecca's to the last delicate detail. The one remaining china-blue eye stared in blind consternation at the opposite window, sanded to frosty luminescence by the storm outside.

Allyson set her teeth and forced herself to lift one of the limp white wrists to check for a pulse, but there was really no question. Still, she checked the carotid artery before turning away, blinking back tears. Rebecca watched without comprehension.

"I'm okay, Rebecca," Allyson said. "Are you?" Her voice was thin and wavery, like a child's. And her throat hurt.

Rebecca put one hand to her head. "I think so," she said. And then, with sudden realization, "Kim? . . ."

"She's dead," said Allyson. Rebecca closed her eyes, her face pale. Allyson silently released her safety straps. Rebecca was al-

ways quicker to tears than Allyson. Her chin trembled. Allyson pushed the straps aside and put her arms around her sister.

"Those damn pilots," said Rebecca.

"It wasn't their fault, Rebecca," said Allyson. "Now, come on. One of them is hurt; we ought to see if we can help."

Rebecca sighed and wiped her eyes. "You're right," she said, rising. She didn't look at Kim. "Okay," she said, steadying herself against a projecting security bar. "I'm ready; let's go."

They tried the cargo bay first, but that was blocked with dust or some other obstruction, and wouldn't budge. They would have to get out through the cockpit.

Todd and Frank were still inside. Todd had awkwardly covered an abrasion on Frank's temple with spray bandages. They were working on the outside door, which appeared to be drifted shut. They pushed it open an inch or so, and a thin trickle of red dust filled the bottom of the crack.

"Need help?" asked Allyson.

Todd glanced up, startled. The gaunt lines of his face seemed hollowed and pale. The dark eyes searched her, and for a moment she thought she saw something questioning, something pleading in his gaze; then it snicked shut like a door closing and suddenly he was a person and she was furniture again. He shrugged. "Why not?" he said.

Together the four of them wrenched the door open and climbed out over the drift that blocked it. While the others stared in dazed surprise and growing horror at their surroundings, Frank stood by the door, waiting. He kept turning his head from side to side with nervous little gestures like a fox in a cage, his face white, the skin drawn taut over the bones of his cheeks. He didn't say anything, but Allyson realized with a start of unexpected sympathy that he was now blind.

Beside him, Todd stood with one hand still on the door as if for support, and said slowly, "It's a crater, Frank. We're inside the damn thing."

"Inside?" Frank moved his eyes as if he could see, but they were flat and lifeless. "Is it deep? Narrow?"

"Not deep," said Todd, "but too damn narrow. I don't know how visible we are, but I'd say not very. And even if we had an ADS, the signal would bounce off the walls and never get out."

"Oh." Frank thought about it for a moment. "Well, you'd better get busy," he said. "Show the clones how to build solar stills; and we'll need shelter. If you bring me whatever electronic equipment

you can find, including that damn radio, maybe I can build us some communication equipment."

"We already know how to build stills, Mr. Lewis," Allyson said. "We're Martians, too, you know. Look, why don't you sit down and let my sister have a look at that head wound while your brother and I get the supplies out of the skimmer."

"I'm all right," said Frank.

"My sister's a doctor," said Allyson. "I think you should let her take a look at your injury. Maybe she can't do much, with the equipment at hand, but please let her try." She ignored Todd's startled eyes. Why the hell were people always so surprised Rebecca was a doctor? Todd and Frank were identical twins; surely they wouldn't believe, as so many people did, that because they looked alike the clones were interchangeable.

"Your sister's a doctor?" said Frank. He turned his head again, searching his private darkness, perhaps looking for hope.

"That's right," said Rebecca, "I am. Here, let me help you find a place to sit; I'd really like to take a look at that wound, if you'll let me."

Sunlight glittered off the sanded hull of the skimmer. The air smelled like hot dust and herbs bioformed from Earth varieties for the Martian desert. Allyson reluctantly met Todd's eyes and waited.

He shook himself and glanced from her to Frank and back again. "Sure, let her look at it, Frank," he said. Hope burned like fire in his eyes; Allyson realized with odd disappointment that he wasn't going to comment on the clones' differences. He was wrestling with some personal demon and didn't care about the clones. They were cargo. In a crash, you make use of whatever cargo turns out to be handy.

Even the usual stupid questions would have been better than indifference, she thought, and wondered why it mattered.

"You," Todd said, "could help me get the supplies."

"I have a name," she said, and immediately wished she hadn't.

"Most of us do," he said. Those sardonic eyes raked her again and she blushed.

"Let's go," she said stiffly.

He smiled; a thin, unexpectedly bitter smile; and led her back into the skimmer. While he disconnected the radio and collected what other electronic gear he could find, she sorted through the supplies in the cockpit, piling undamaged goods on an emergency blanket and tossing the useless things aside. They worked in si-

lence, and she was careful to avoid his eyes.

"There's more food and water in back," she said at last. She hesitated, thinking of Kim. She didn't want to face that awful apparition again; but they might be here for days. They couldn't leave her where she was. "And my sister," she said with difficulty. "We'll have to," she swallowed, "bury her."

"I can do that," he said.

She looked up, startled, and met his eyes. They were unexpectedly kind; but there was still a cold, determined barrier there. He held himself apart from her with a fierce, blind rejection that was like a physical pain.

"That's kind of you," she said, "but I can manage."

He shrugged. "Whatever," he said, and his expression went flat again; distant and reserved, as if a fog obscured him from her.

She wanted to say, *Clones aren't any different from identical twins, damn you!* But she bit back the words and swallowed a painful lump in her throat. Because they were different. Identical twins were natural-borns. They were identical to each other, but carbon copies of nobody. And they'd never been thought of as organ banks. There was nothing to protect. You could recognize them as people and still not be a murderer; because none of them were slaughtered to provide organ replacement for others.

The tattoo on her foot had branded her soul, but she knew why it had to be there. The first use of clones had been for replacement parts; it was still their main function. Those few who were permitted to live, their cerebrums intact, could not be considered human. Because what would that say about all those thousands whose cerebrums were destroyed?

So it made no difference how many scientific facts people knew; or how much genetics. Every high school student knew that on a genetic basis there was no difference between clones and identical twins. If anything, the twins were stranger; it was perfectly well-known what formed clones. You take the nucleus from a cell, put it in an egg from which the nucleus has been removed, and presto! you have the equivalent of a fertilized egg; a diploid cell or zygote, ready to grow and divide and form an embryo.

But it still wasn't known why identical twins sometimes occurred. You take two haploid cells, put them together and they're a fertilized egg or zygote; but why do the two cells of its first division sometimes separate from one another and develop into two independent embryos? Nobody knew, and it wasn't really important. Because they were natural-borns, and nobody questioned

their right to live.

But clones—people created in the lab, by artificial means—that was different. They were replacement parts. They'd been created for replacement parts, and the first ones permitted to live had been so grateful for the gift of life they'd set the stage for all the discrimination to follow. Of course they didn't demand their rights as people; that would be saying their benefactors were murdering a person every time they destroyed the cerebrum of a cloned embryo.

Allyson smiled thinly, as she always did when she reached that point in her philosophical fury. Maybe it wasn't really much different from abortion. The only real difference was that the cloned embryos were created intentionally for "abortion." And the real question was, would it make any difference to the social attitude if the sex act were somehow involved in the creation of clones?

"What's funny?"

She came back to the present with a start, to find herself staring into Todd's dark, watchful eyes. His face was pale, and there were hard lines of tension around his mouth and eyes.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I was just thinking." For a moment her face, usually rigidly guarded, retained a look of vulnerability or of terrible sorrow; then, as she focused on Todd's hooded gaze, the lines of her expression slowly tautened. The straight, stern set of her lips returned; and the startling intensity of her eyes. "Are you all right, Todd?" she asked. "You look pale."

His own expression hardened. "I'm fine," he said. Their words hung between them like a glittering facade on a broken building; the tone and content bore no relation to their expressions. It was as if four people sat there; two friends speaking, and two wary strangers watching. "While you're in the back," he added in the same friendly tone, "why don't you see if you can find some clear plastic sheeting for the solar stills? I'm gonna get this stuff outside and see what Frank can do with it."

She hesitated. "He may not be able to," she began.

"It'll give him something to do," he said without meeting her eyes. It was quite a concession; he'd explained a behavior, as if she were a normal person with some stake in what happened. But before she could respond he added impatiently, "Go on, and find some plastic. We're gonna need all the water we can get."

"Okay," she said. "Hand me the pliers; I'll need them to get into the emergency supplies." Her eyes were as cold and gray as a winter sky.

He kept his hard-shadowed gaze on her as he reached out with the pliers, holding them flat on his palm so she could pick them up without touching him. But she had to look down at his hand to find them, and paused with her hand half-extended, staring.

It wasn't quite a surprise, but it was a shock. She had guessed something was wrong. She hadn't guessed how wrong.

When she didn't accept the pliers he glanced down at them, then looked back at her face, his eyes widened with surprise and something like fear. "Oh," he said, and glanced at his hand again, then drew it back. He made an ineffectual effort to wipe the sticky red stain from their handles, but it was too late. "It's just a scratch," he said, "a little cut. It bled a lot. . . ." He paused, watching her. His face was shiny with sweat. But it was early morning, and still chilly outside.

She waited. Her eyes revealed nothing. He offered her the pliers again. "I'm all right," he said. "There's nothing to worry about."

"So you're a hero," she said. The words were as cold as her eyes.

He shrugged. "Think whatever you want to," he said. "Just get some plastic from the back, okay?"

"The only human left, so you have to stay in charge, right?" She took the pliers and turned away. "For God's sake don't trust a clone; they're not real people."

"Whatever," he said. "If you need help later with your sister back there, let me know."

She whirled on him in a fit of fury. "You won't *touch* her," she said. "Do you hear me? You won't so much as *look* at her! I can handle it by myself, or with Rebecca, and I don't want your filthy natural-born hands on her; she can be spared at least that!"

He stared. "Fine," he said mildly. The sardonic, mocking smile was still in his eyes, but fogged or faded as if by a sheet of scratched acrylic between his face and hers. She turned away from him with a bitter feeling of defeat.

When she got outside with the plastic and the rest of the emergency supplies, Frank was settled happily in the shade of a large rock, fiddling with the electronic equipment Todd brought him. Todd and Rebecca were working on the other side of the skimmer, draping parachutes from the wing and weighting them against wind with rocks and soil. If another sandstorm came up, they'd have to get back in the ruined skimmer; otherwise, the wing would make a good shelter. With a fire under it, they might even manage to stay warm at night.

Todd and Rebecca were doing well enough by themselves. Ally-

son deposited the plastic and supplies in a heap near the skimmer's door and climbed back into the cockpit. Just in case another sandstorm did come up, it would be a good idea to have Kim's body somewhere else. And in spite of what she'd said in anger to Todd, she didn't think Rebecca would be much help with that task. She'd be fine if it were a stranger's body. But not Kim's. Not her sister, with half her face caved in.

Allyson had always been the strongest of them, both physically and emotionally. But even her strength didn't quite match her task. The three of them had always been very close. They had to be; they had no one else. And they were almost identical. So what Allyson had to move was not just the body of her sister, but also the image of herself discolored and distorted by death.

She set about the task reluctantly, but it had to be done. By the time she had Kim's body out the cockpit door tears streaked her cheeks and she was shaking uncontrollably. But she resolutely grasped Kim's wrists and dragged her as far from the skimmer as she could. Only when she was out of sight beyond a low ridge of jutting rocks did she sit down with her head in her hands to cry.

At least, she thought as she piled rocks over the broken body, Kim was free now. She died too far from civilization to be whisked into hospital, taken apart like a mechanical thing, and moved piece by piece to an organ bank or other people's bodies.

Oh, true, the same thing would happen to anybody who did die within civilization's reach. It wasn't only clones who were viewed as spare parts of the moment of death. Especially on sparsely populated Mars, nobody was 'wasted.' And that was as it should be. Still, for a clone, the idea of being used as spare parts any time held a peculiar horror.

It seemed oddly fitting that Kim should, instead, have a lonely burial under the rocks and sand of the desert, with only another clone to bid her goodbye. Allyson pushed the last rock into place with a sad satisfaction and settled back on her heels to rest.

Her hands and face were dusty and streaked with tears and sweat. The red dust was everywhere. She could even taste it, along with the sticky salt taste of tears. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and sat for a long time beside her sister's shallow grave, staring with unseeing eyes at the hard red rim of the crater around her. The desert air smelled of dust and pungent herbs. And there was silence, as far as forever. It was a good place to be buried. It might even be a good place to die.

When Allyson returned to the skimmer there was a peculiar

light of defiance in her eyes. She set silently about digging holes for solar stills, and when Rebecca and Todd joined her she barely glanced at them.

"I buried Kim," she said.

"We built a shelter," said Todd, as if it were of equal significance. Perhaps it was.

"How's Frank?" she asked without much interest.

He was sitting within hearing distance, but too engrossed in his electronic puzzle to hear what they said. He seemed oddly unconcerned by blindness. Most people in his place would have fought it. He accepted it, and was learning already how to work within its boundaries.

"I'm worried about him," Rebecca said quietly. "The optic nerve is under pressure, obviously. If we don't get him to medical facilities in time, it may atrophy—"

"He'll be all right," said Todd.

Allyson looked at Rebecca. "'Fight when you can win,'" she said. "'Accept the inevitable when it is.'" She smiled, a sad little smile that twisted her lips and barely touched her glass-blue eyes.

"What's that?" asked Todd. "Sounded like a quote." He had paused in his work and settled back on his heels, watching her. His eyes were sunken, shadowed places in a hollow face. She was startled at the hopelessness there.

"Just something Barbara used to say," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Barbara? Who's that?" he asked.

"Our original sister," said Rebecca. "The one we're copies of." She frowned at him. "You do look pale," she said. "You could be in shock; you should rest."

He shook his head. "I'm okay," he said.

"He's a hero," said Allyson. Her voice was harsh, her eyes cold. But she caught him when he fell. And was surprised at the answering note of tenderness she felt when he stared up at her with pleading eyes.

"Allyson," he said, and she was so startled she barely heard the rest of what he said. *He knew all along! He could tell them apart!* "For God's sake, tell Frank I'm all right," he whispered before those splendid, pain-wracked, frightened eyes slid shut.

And then she understood. She stared at Rebecca, her own eyes dark like storm clouds. "He is a hero," she said. Her voice broke. "Oh, please," she whispered, "will he be all right?"

They carried him to the shelter he had built with Rebecca, and

put him on a blanket in the shade. It took them a moment to find the injury; he'd bound it clumsily with spray bandages to slow the bleeding. It was an awful, deadly puncture just below his ribs. Rebecca sent Allyson to get the medikit and water while she tried to make him comfortable and examine the wound.

Allyson knew very little about medicine and, as a rule, cared not at all. She brought the water and kit and sat down beside Todd, but her fear was so distracting, Rebecca sent her away again. So she wandered out to the rock Frank sat beside with his electronics.

The sun was beginning to encroach on his little island of shade. He heard her coming and lifted his head, blind eyes as private and shadowed as Todd's. "It's Allyson, Frank," she said. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I always said I could put one of these things together blindfolded. Now I've had a chance to prove it. And I think it's gonna work! It's almost done."

"Then we can call Umbra Landing!"

"If we can get the signal outside this crater," he said. He turned back to his work, his fingers moving among the wires as confidently as if he could see. "How's Todd?" he asked casually.

She stared. "He's," she said, and paused. Frank waited, his shoulders hunched a little against whatever news she might bring him. He knew something was wrong. Todd thought he could keep knowledge of his injury from Frank, but Frank probably knew from the start. All Todd succeeded in doing was keeping it from the clones, who could have helped him. "He'll be all right now," she said. "Rebecca's taking care of him." And heard in memory her own terror whispering, *Please, will he be all right?*

They sat in silence for a moment while Frank's busy fingers traced patterns among the wires. "He didn't want to scare me," Frank said. It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway.

"No."

Another silence. Then, "D'you do that? It's just like being identical twins, isn't it? D'you find yourself doing stupid things to protect the others?"

She nodded, forgetting he couldn't see her. "Sometimes from dangers that aren't even real," she said.

"Yeah." He put his tools down and rested his hands on the radio. "You know," he said slowly, "identical twins are really clones. Accidents of nature, but one of us is a clone of the other. I remember wondering in high school why they were so careful not

to use that word when they described the genetic process that caused us."

"For the same reason they're so careful always to use it with us," she said. The sun was very hot on her back. She thought about getting up to move into the shade, but it was too much trouble.

"I know that now," he said. "I guess we're just lucky the first identical twins happened a long time before they knew how to do organ transplants."

She picked a branch from a shrub beside her and twisted its leaves in her fingers till the sharp odor of its sap filled the shimmering air. "What will they do," she said, "when they figure it out?"

He turned a sardonic smile to her, so similar to Todd's it wrenched her heart. "They've figured it out, a long time ago," he said. "They don't know what to do."

She sighed. "Is the radio fixed?"

"I think so," he said. "You'll have to take it up on the rim, to get a signal out. Is it climbable? It's got to be line-of-sight, so if you can't get it high enough we'll have to wait for a search craft."

"To fly right over us," she said. "I can take it up on the rim. How does it work?"

"Push this," he said, "and pray. Here's the microphone."

She took the awkward bundle in her hands and paused, watching him. "You'll be all right?" The lines of his face were different from Todd's. Not as sharp and distinct.

"I'm fine," he said.

Still she hesitated. "We're all heroes," she said. "We keep protecting each other from our own demons, so half the time we don't even see each other's."

"And if we do," he said, "we still can't touch them."

"No," she said, and closed her eyes. "No, we can't touch them." Abruptly she jumped up, clutching the radio, and ran. He couldn't see her tears, but she wouldn't cry in front of him anyway. She had never in her adult life cried in front of anyone; she wasn't going to start now.

She returned empty-handed through the shimmering heat of the afternoon. The skimmer lay like a broken mirror at the base of the rim. There was no sign of life. Rebecca and the twins must have taken refuge beneath the shade of the wing. Allyson sat down to rest on the rocks just above the skimmer, and stared for a

long while at the emergency blankets guarding the little shelter under the wing, before heat and thirst finally drove her down the slope.

Her face was streaked with dust, her hands and knees scraped and bloody from the rocks. But in the shade of the shelter, only her glittering eyes were visible. "The radio worked," she said. "The forecast's okay, so there should be a rescue craft here by nightfall."

Rebecca handed her a cup of water. Frank lay beside the skimmer next to his brother. None of them spoke. Her eyes still blind from the sun, Allyson couldn't tell if the twins were awake. She accepted the water with trembling hands, squatted just inside the shelter as if prepared for flight, and drank sparingly, watching the darkness where the twins lay.

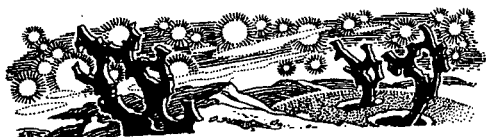
She was afraid to speak. She rested the cup on her knees and held herself still with a terrible effort. The silence was like a living thing around her. Out in the desert sun, that had seemed like a blessing. Here it kept her poised, tense, listening. If he were dead they would say it, surely. *Oh, please, will he be all right?*

A pebble scraped in the darkness. Her eyes, dark, burning pits in her sunburned face, were beginning to adjust to the shadows. She waited, staring with a frightened and frightening intensity at the darker shadow that was the twins. Beside her, Rebecca took the forgotten cup from her and sipped from it, looking over its rim at the twins.

Just when Allyson had decided it never would, the shadow moved, separated, became two people. One of them lying with his bandaged head on a folded blanket; the other pushing himself up on one elbow to smile his sardonic, guarded smile at her.

It's one thing to make the decision never to cry in front of anyone. It's quite another to stick to it. She didn't know how she got across the little shelter and into Todd's arms. She was just there. And it was where she belonged.

"So," he said softly. "You're a hero, too."





PROUD RIDER

by Barry B. Longyear

art: Jack Gaughan



PROUD RIDER

This is the fourth tale of the planet Momus, settled some two hundred years before this story opens by the survivors of a disabled circus-spaceship. Meanwhile, up in Maine, Mr. Longyear is working on a novel with the same setting.

Round-hoof'd, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,
Broad breast, full eye, small head and nostril wide,
High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,
Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide:
Look, what a horse should have he did not lack,
Save a proud rider on so proud a back.

—Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*

From the hills surrounding Miira, on the rutted road to Porse, four white stallions tossed their heads in unison and pranced in perfect step. Bareback on the left lead horse, hands on hips, a glower on his face, a young boy in a brown jerkin turned his head toward the old man mounted on the left rear horse. The old man held one hand on hip; the other held a pair of rude crutches.

"Father, we won't sell them, then. But if we could rent them to Davvik the logger . . ."

"Silence! No more of that!"

The boy looked forward, his glower deepening. Noticing the hoof prints leading off the left side of the road into the sandy wastes of the desert, he pressed his left knee lightly against the horse's shoulder. The horse and its companion wheeled left, followed by the old man's horse and its companion. The boy turned and looked back at the mountains, crowded with great trees. Davvik would pay four hundred movills a day for the horses.

"I know what you think, Jeda," the old man called. "You would take them and make dray animals out of them. Not while I live,

Jeda. Not while I live."

"Father . . ."

"Hold your tongue!"

The boy shrugged and let his horse find the path to the flats. As the horses reached the hard sand, Jeda squeezed his knees together and his pair of mounts stopped. The old man nodded at his empty horse, and it stopped while he pulled alongside his son and called his horse to halt.

"I saw them move. Both times I saw your knees move."

"What of it, Father?" The boy spread his arms to encompass the desert and empty hills. "Where is my audience?"

"No audience would sit still to watch such clumsiness." The old man lifted his right leg up and over his mount's back. "Help me down."

"Yes, Father." Swinging his own leg over, the boy slid to the sand and walked to the left side of his father's horse. He gripped his father around the waist; and the old man leaned his crutches against his horse, put both hands on his son's shoulders, and slid down. With his crutches, the old man moved out onto the hard sand.

"The cord, Jeda."

The boy unwound a string from around his waist and handed one end to the old man. Pulling the six-and-a-half meter cord tight, Jeda walked a circle around the old man, dragging his foot every few steps. As the circle closed, he walked back toward the center, gathering up the string. "What shall it be first, Father?"

"Dressage. You need work on it." The old man hobbled outside the ring, turned, and faced Jeda. He watched as the four stallions pulled abreast of the ring and stood motionless. Jeda, just as motionless, began putting the four animals through their drills. He watched the boy closely but could detect none of the signals the boy made to the horses as they reared, wheeled, paraded, and pranced as a perfect team. The boy needs no work on that, thought the old man; all he needs is an audience. He's good, better than I was. "Voltige, now Jeda!"

Jeda ran to the lead horse, leaped up and over it, falling in perfect position to jump the next stallion in line. As the boy jumped the next horse and the next, his taut muscles standing out against his tanned skin, his father imagined the boy decked in the rider's silver-spangled tights, silver bows in the braided manes of the gleaming white stallions. The old man had seen that once before, when he was only a boy himself, and his own father,

mother, and uncle dazzled the crowd at the Great Ring in Tarzak. Now, as the sun dipped into the horizon, Jeda began his tricks, balancing on one horse, tumbling off, then leaping to the next to balance on his hands. He flipped from the horse's back only to land and pirouette on the next. The old man watched Jeda's face and could tell the boy was no longer thinking of their argument. Glowing in rapture, the boy and the stallions were one.

This is how it should always be, thought the old man. But after a moment, he shook his head, knowing that it might never be. Tonight the house would be quiet and sullen, until either Jeda or Zani, Jeda's mother, would begin the argument again. The spell broken, the old man turned from the ring.

"Come, Jeda. We go home."

Davvik turned to Zani, shrugged, and looked back at the old man, silently concentrating on his meal. Jeda, seated on a cushion across the low table from Davvik, between Zani and the old man, shook his head and pushed the tung berries on his plate around with his finger. Davvik leaned on the table. "Hamid, you are unreasonable. Look at Zani, your wife. When will she get a new robe?"

The old man broke some cobit and dropped the two pieces of bread on his plate. "You sit at my table to insult my wife, Davvik?"

"It is not an insult, Hamid, but the truth. Don't trust my words; look for yourself."

The old man lifted his eyes and turned to Zani. Her robe, like Jeda's and his own, was many times patched and mended. Her hair, still streaked with black, framed a tired face bowed in shame. Hamid looked back at the logger. "Miira is not a wealthy town, Davvik. We are not the only family in patches."

"I have no patches, Hamid." Davvik waved his hands about the room. "No one in Miira, or anywhere on Momus for all that, need wear patches. Not if they have any sense. The new market centers are prospering, and my wood is bringing good prices. Think what you could do with four hundred movills..."

Hamid slapped his hand on the table. "They are liberty horses, Davvik! They will not pull your sleds. Never have their mouths felt a bit nor their backs a harness." Hamid shook his head and turned back to his meal. "What can a roustabout understand about liberty horses?"

Davvik clenched his fists and flushed red. "And you, Great

Hamid of the Miira riders, you understand, do you?"

"Yes."

"Then understand this, as well. I am no roustabout; I am a logger—a businessman. There are no more roustabouts, Hamid, because the circus is dead, gone, naught but a dream in an old man's brain!"

The old man pushed his plate from him, and peered through shaggy white brows at his wife and son. Both seemed very concerned with their plates and eating utensils. "Zani."

She looked up, not meeting his glance. "Yes, Hamid?"

"Why have you invited this bastard son of a carnival geek to eat our bread?"

Davvik stood, his lips twitching with unspoken oaths. Turning, he bowed toward Zani. "I am sorry for you. I tried, but it is no use." He turned toward Jeda. "Boy, my offer of thirty-five coppers a day still holds. I can use a good rider—" He looked at Hamid. "—to drive horses at useful work." Bowing again, he turned from the room into the street.

Hamid turned back to his meal, but Zani clasped his arm with a fierce strength. He saw tears in her eyes. "Old man, you asked me a question; now, you hear my answer! I want my sons back. That's why Davvik sat here tonight, and you shamed me. Your son and I—we are ashamed!"

"Wife . . ."

"But whose wife will it be, Hamid? Not yours, unless Jeda stays in this house and my three other sons come home!" Hamid winced. The old woman's threat was empty, but it hurt all the same. He watched as she stood and walked into her room, pulling the curtain closed behind her. The old man sighed and turned to look at his son. His eyes cast down, Jeda sat holding his hands in his lap.

"And you, my son?"

Jeda shrugged one shoulder. "Am I a barker, Father, to find words when there is nothing to say?"

"You think I am wrong, then."

The boy looked up at nothing. "I don't know." He looked at Hamid, his hand on his breast. "Everything I feel agrees with you, Father." He dropped his hand shaking his head. "But everything I see agrees with Davvik. We aren't like the magicians or clowns; our act can't play the roadside fires. We need a ring."

"There are rings, Jeda. Here in Miira, the—"

"Father, to use the ring our act must draw coppers. When did the ring in Miira, or the Great Ring in Tarzak, last see riding?"

The old man shrugged. They both knew the answer. "There may be fairs, again. When I was a boy, the fairs had grand circuses."

"It has been a long time since you were a boy." Jeda placed his hand gently on the old man's arm. "Father, there will be no more fairs. The people of Momus trade differently now; there are stores, shops, markets."

"Then, why not a circus in itself? Ancient Earth had circuses that were on their own. Even the ship that put our ancestors on this planet made its way through the hundred quadrants bringing the circus to countless planets. They were wealthy."

"They had audiences, Father. Momus has been a show without an audience for almost two centuries. The people have turned to other things. We must eat."

The old man studied the boy. "You want to be a rider, don't you? You must; it is in our blood."

"Yes." Jeda withdrew his hand. "As did Micah, Taramun, and Desa, my brothers before me. But they wanted to marry, eat, provide for children. Is that wrong?"

"Bah!" The old man shook his head. "They are not riders. They are *teamsters*! They left this house." The old man made a fist, then dropped it in his lap. "They left this house. What about you, Jeda? Will you drive nags for Davvik?"

"Father, we cannot survive without an audience. The jungle acts, trapeze artists, dancing bears—where are they all now? An act like ours is not a circus; we must have many acts and an audience willing to pay to see them."

"Momus has people—"

"Father, they think they are circus people. They have already seen the show. Perhaps a circus every five or ten years to honor the old traditions, but they would not pay to keep a circus together between times. What do we do then?"

Hamid remembered the spark he had seen in the sky. "The soldiers, Jeda. There are many soldiers out there on the satellites."

Jeda shook his head. "They may not see us, Father. Great Allenby has decreed it. You know that."

"Allenby—a newsteller turned trickster!"

"The Great Ring made him our Statesman, Father. It is the law." Jeda stood and brushed the crumbs from his robe. "I must look to the horses."

Hamid nodded. "Jeda."

"Yes, Father?"

"Jeda, will you ride for Davvik?"

"I haven't decided."

The old man pulled himself to his feet with one of his crutches. "If you do, Jeda, you are welcome to remain here in my house."

Jeda nodded. "Thank you. I know it was difficult to say."

Hamid nodded and the boy went through the curtain into the street. Hobbling to the door, the old man looked after his son until he was swallowed by the dark. Listening, Hamid could make out Pinot on the other side of the fountain, singing to herself. No longer a singer, thought Hamid, but a cobit gatherer, selling roots instead of songs. His sons, no longer riders, but teamsters. And where, he thought, where are the lions, elephants, and bears? Where are those golden boys and girls who walked the highwire and flew above the sawdust from bar to bar? Where are the bands? The music and laughter gone, replaced by cheese making and pillow stuffing.

Hamid stepped through the door and looked up at the night sky. Even straining his eyes, he could not see them. "But *you* are there, and if I must move Heaven and Momus, I will have you as an audience for my son, the rider!"

In the swamps north of Arcadia, a great lizard exposed its belly to the sun and settled back in the ooze. After scraping a handful of bottom slime from below, the lizard smeared its warming belly, sighed, and dreamed of Mamoot's breadcakes. Mamoot's mother stuffed them with tung berries and coated them with thick crusts of salt. Opening one slitted eye, the lizard noted the position of the sun. Mamoot would not show at the edge of the swamp for two more hours. Seeing movement, the eye locked on a fat waterwasp and tracked it as it buzzed around closer and closer to the seemingly innocent lump of mud. Curling its tongue, the lizard tensed for the strike, then relaxed, letting its pink snake of a tongue flop from its mouth into the water. Fly away little morsel, thought the lizard. Mamoot would be angry if I spoiled my appetite.

"Stoop! Stoop!"

The lizard lifted its great head and turned in the direction of the call. It's Mamoot, thought the lizard. He is early, and I haven't finished my bath.

"Stoop! Come out here right now, you ugly moron!"

Rolling over, the lizard stood on its hind legs and began wading toward the noise.

"Stoop! Are you coming?"

"Oz, ahoot, oming!" answered the lizard.

"Coming now?"

"Oming ow!" The lizard shook its head and rolled up its tongue. Mamoot was angry already. There's no help for it but to hurry. Reaching the swampbush, the lizard pulled itself up on the spongy soil and shouldered through the underbrush.

"You better hurry, you smelly fat toad!"

The lizard pushed its way into the clearing and looked down to see Mamoot, hands on his hips, stamping his foot in anger. Next to Mamoot was a larger version of the boy, holding some papers in one hand and his nose in the other. "Hake?"

The boy ran to the lizard and delivered a swift kick in a shin armored with thick, almost nerveless skin. "Look at you, you stinking lump! I'll give you cake, alright! Go wash! I've brought my father to see you."

The lizard looked at the larger human with curiosity. The man pointed toward the clear watered lake, and made a show of holding his nose.

"Old."

The boy kicked the lizard again in the tail. "I don't care if it's cold, you foul-smelling slime snake! Get in there and wash!"

Imagining the icy lake water closing over its head, the lizard bent down at the shore and tested the water with its toe. A shiver ran from its toe throughout its mud-caked body. It turned back toward the boy and smiled. "Hake?"

The boy folded his arms. "You wash, Stoop! Right now!"

Stoop faced the boy, rose to its full height, and folded its arms. "Hake!"

The boy narrowed his eyes, trying to stare down the lidless lizard's gaze. After a few determined minutes of futility, the boy stamped his foot and turned to his father. "Show him, Father."

The man picked up a sack from the floor of the clearing and held it up for Stoop to see.

"Hake?"

"Yes," answered the man. "All the cake you can eat."

Stoop grinned and leaped into the water, hardly feeling the cold as it thought about the cake, a whole sack of cake. Its body clean, Stoop's head broke water as the lizard walked toward the shore. Mamoot stood on the shore soaking wet. "You, you *Stoop*, you! Look at me!"

The lizard left the water and grinned at the boy. "Hake?"

"Here, Stoop." The man held up a breadcake. "Come over here and get it."

Stoop lumbered over, took the cake from the man's hand, and sat on its hind legs to eat. Mamoot stormed over and stood next to his father. "Well, Father?"

The man looked at the papers, and then at Stoop. "It's big enough, all right. What can it do?"

"Stoop can do anything an elephant could do, and then some. I've trained him the same way you said Great Great Grandfather trained the elephants."

The man shook his head. "If we only could, Mamoot. Momus hasn't seen a great-beast act in over a century! And now, a circus." He handed one of the papers to the boy. "But look, Mamoot, we will need more than one."

Mamoot took the paper headlined **HAMID'S GREATER SHOWS. Now Organizing At The Great Ring In Tarzak. Auditions Daily.** Below the type, a parade of great Earth beasts was depicted, dressed in tassels with knobs of brass on the tips of their long white tusks. Each beast's nose curled around the tail of the beast in front of it. Mamoot held the paper out to Stoop, who took it with one hand while the other, claws extended, picked the tung-berry pits from between its teeth. The lizard shivered at the sight of the frightening Earth animals, but something stirred inside his green-armored hide at the sight of the colors, clowns, horses, and all the humans, all different sizes and shapes, stacked in tiers to be looked at while the fearsome beasts passed by.

"See the elephants, Stoop?" Mamoot jabbed the paper.

"Sssee."

"That's our act, but we need more lizards. Smart ones; eleven more."

Stoop held the paper down so the boy could see, and poked the picture with a distended claw. "Phats ow?"

Mamoots shook his head. "No, they're all gone. The last elephant on Momus died before you were hatched."

Stoop nodded. "Or zards. Ow uch?"

"Four breadcakes a day for each lizard, but no deal unless we get eleven more."

Stoop rubbed its chin. "Ive."

"Four, and that's it!"

Stoop folded its arms and looked down its long snout at the boy. Friendship was one thing, but business was business. "Ive."

Mamoot fumed, stamped around, waved his arms, and ground

his teeth. "All right! Five, you thief, but you better be back here in one hour with eleven more lizards, or no cakes for anybody!"

Stoop fell to his front legs and ran for the swamp, cutting a wide swath through the underbrush. As he hit the water, he heard Mamoot call. "Stoop!"

"Oz?" The lizard stopped in the water to listen.

"You tell 'em that everybody washes every day. You hear me?"

Stoop scratched his head and cursed himself for not holding out for six cakes. He shrugged, thinking of the spectacle of humans to be seen at the circus. In a moment, Stoop decided that the spectacle was compensation enough for the missing cake.

"You hear me, Stoop?"

"Oz," answered Stoop, "alla tie assshh." The lizard swam off in the muck, hoping to find eleven other lizards smart enough to learn to talk and perform, but not smart enough to figure out that they didn't really have to give Stoop one of their cakes every day in return for the job.

Tessia held the bar, waiting for her father, who was hanging from his knees with outstretched hands, to reach the top of his swing. As he came up, his body almost parallel with the grassy ground beneath, she pushed the bar from her. It swung down, drawing an arc through the empty air that reached its zenith at the moment her father reached the bottom of his swing, his body perpendicular to the ground. She saw herself releasing the bar, balled and somersaulting, and reaching her father, his back and arms arched to receive her, as he reached a point half-way through his outside swing. She would fall a long way, but the space was needed for the quintuple somersault. A slight breeze brushed her face, and she watched the leafy whips of the trees move. Catching the bar, she timed it and sent it back, empty.

"Good," called her father. "Wait for the perfect moment. Dead wind."

Tessia looked down, and the net as always seemed too small. But it had caught her every time she had tried the quintuple before. It was big enough. Kanta, her mother, stood beside the net, smiling. Tessia waved and looked back at the trees, which were still moving. This time I will make it, she thought, catching the bar and sending it back. In her heart, her pride at this knowledge met her pain. After she made the quintuple, the equipment would come down—the ropes, bars, stands, posts, and net sold for nothing; the family on the road as tumblers. But if I miss this time,

the trapeze will stay up. We will be flyers for another day.

The wind died as the bar returned. "Wait for the next one," called her father. Tessia caught the bar and sent it back. As she pulled herself up to the high perch, she knew she could not fail on purpose. This was the moment. Kanta and Vedis both knew it; Tessia knew it. As the bar swung up, Tessia dove from the perch to meet it. Its cool weight in her hands, she used her own weight to increase the swing, heels over her head as she reached the top. As she descended, she swung her legs and body down, the gravity tugging at her cheeks.

"Ready!" Her father's voice came as if from a long distance away. As she reached the outside of her swing, using her arms to draw her shoulders well above the bar, a strange hush fell over the deserted glade. Her audience of insects, avians, and ground animals stopped to watch the golden girl in sequined blue drop down, down, swinging her legs forward. At the top of her swing, she left the bar, spinning—two, three, four, and—five! She didn't find her father's strong hands wrapped around her wrists anything remarkable. It was over. She had made the quintuple. Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked up into her father's beaming face.

"You did it, Tessia! You did it!" Vedis pulled her up and kissed her forehead.

"But it is the end, Father. Let me drop to the net."

Vedis released her at the bottom of his swing and she fell, landing in a sitting position. One bounce, then two, then she grasped the edge of the net and somersaulted over it. As she dropped to the ground, Kanta rushed to her, kissing and embracing her. Tessia hugged her mother, wishing the moment would never end. Opening her eyes, she saw an old cripple in rider's brown at the edge of the glade. Realizing that he had been seen, the old man raised a crutch in the air and waved it. "Hallo! I am Hamid of the Miira riders."

Kanta turned and looked. In seconds Vedis was down from the net standing next to his wife and daughter. "What is your business here, rider? We come here to be alone."

The old man hobbled closer and stopped next to the net. Looking at Tessia, he smiled. "I saw you, child; it was beautiful."

"Thank you, but you interrupt a moment dear to my family."

The old man looked at the three in turn, stopping on Tessia. "Child, I am here that the moment will never end."

§ § §

Great Kamera leaned back from his table and clasped his hands over his large belly. The barker, in dusty red-and-purple robe, stood before him. "This thing you said in the street, barker. Repeat it."

The barker bowed deeply. "Of course, Great Kamera, but there is a small matter . . ."

"You will be paid."

"Of course. I never doubted—"

"Get on with it!"

"Yes, of course." The barker grinned, exposing yellowing teeth. "Great Kamera, I advertise auditions for the greatest show on Momus, a grand circus operated by the Great Hamid of the Miira riders."

"A rider?"

"Yes, Great Kamera. Owner of the finest—"

"You tell me a rider will operate the shows?"

"Yes. But as Great Kamera has undoubtedly learned through his many years, the first circus was started by a rider, Philip Astley. . . ."

"Barker, you presume to instruct me on the history of the circus?"

The barker bowed deeply. "No, no, Great Kamera. If I may repeat—"

"No!" Kamera held up his hand. "Not that. What shows has he?"

"There will be Jeda, Hero and Great Emperor of all the horsemen, riding Hamid's own quartet of white stallions; there will be the Flying Javettes, featuring Tessia and the quintuple somersault; then, the Rhume Family and its Great Phant Lizards, featuring Mamoot and—"

"Barker. Phant lizards?"

"A great-beast act, great Kamera, with fierce monsters whipped and driven from the swamps of Arcadia, tamed and trained by a small boy, who—"

"Go on. What else?"

"The Great Riettas of the high wire will dazzle the crowds with its four-tiered pyramid. Yarouze, the brave lion tamer, will put on a spectacle of daring—"

"Barker, I've never heard of any of these names. Who are these people who pretend to bring a circus into being?" Kamera rubbed his bald head and thought for a moment. "In fact, I do not remember ever seeing a high-wire act before in my life. Nor flyers,

not even those lizards. Is this some kind of joke?"

"Upon my life, Great Kamera. The acts assemble now in the Great Ring."

"Koolis undoubtedly knows of this."

"Yes, of course. The Master of the Great Ring has paid ten thousand movills for the privilege of exhibiting Hamid's Greater Shows."

"Koolis *paid* for the privilege, you say?"

"I arranged the contract myself."

Kamera rubbed his chin. "Koolis parting with coopers can only mean he sees a greater amount returning."

"It is the truth, Great Kamera. For his payment, Koolis will get a quarter of the gate."

"And, barker, I suppose Hamid, whoever he is, is looking for clowns, is he?"

"A circus is the proper setting for a clown, Great Kamera. Do I not speak truly?"

Kamera nodded. Years ago he had played a circus; a poor thing at one of the last fairs ever held. It had been better; almost a spiritual experience. "I make a good—no, an excellent living playing by myself here at the square in Tarzak. What would this Hamid pay if I condescended to lend my name and talents to his bill?"

The barker grinned and shook his head. "The Great Kamera does not understand. Because you are master clown of Momus, Great Hamid will allow you billing for only one thousand movills."

"I must *pay* to perform?"

"Yes."

"That is nonsense! You said yourself, I am master clown of Momus!"

"True, true, Great Kamera." The barker rubbed his hands together. "But, the star clown of Hamid's Greater Shows *will be* master clown of Momus."

Kamera nodded. "I see. Was Koolis swayed with similar logic?"

"Great Koolis also gets a quarter of the gate. You, Great Kamera, will get half of one percent for your coppers."

"And Koolis gets twenty-five by paying ten?"

"Koolis also has the ring."

"Hmmm." Kamera reached under his table and pulled a purse from beneath it, dropping the pouch in front of the barker. "Before you lift those coppers, satisfy me on a point."

"If I can, Great Kamera."

"The circuses died on Momus for lack of an audience. Has this Hamid found an answer?"

The barker shrugged. "Great Kamera, when I asked this same question of the Great Hamid, his answer was cryptic."

"He does not depend on the soldiers, does he? Allenby will not allow them on the planet."

"He only looked up, Great Kamera, and said 'an audience shall be provided.'"

Koolis looked down at the old man sitting on the low stone wall surrounding the Great Ring. Hamid stared at the sawdust. The Master of the Ring looked at Jeda and Davvik, shrugged, and tried again. "Hamid, I not only talked to Disus, but to Great Allenby himself. He will not be moved; the soldiers stay in the satellites."

Hamid moved only his lips. "Did Allenby see the parade?"

Koolis let out a sigh. "It makes no difference."

"If Allenby saw the parade, he could not deny the circus life."

"Hamid, Allenby's concerns encompass the entire planet of Momus. The circus is not his entire world, as it is with us."

"Us?"

Koolis looked offended. "Yes, us."

"If the circus dies, Koolis, you will still have the Great Ring. We will have nothing."

Koolis spat in the sawdust. "Hamid, you know nothing. I've beggered my family to give your circus a place to exist."

"For a quarter of the gate."

"Without an audience coming through that gate, it is twenty-five percent of nothing." Koolis slapped his hands against his legs. "Without the soldiers, your circus—my ring—will be lost. It is my world, too, Hamid!"

The old man looked up and nodded. "I owe you an apology, Koolis." He reached for his purse, then shrugged. "But I owe many people for many things."

Koolis smiled and sat next to the old rider, patting him on the knee. "I'll put it on your account."

Hamid looked from Koolis to his son. "Well, Jeda, say it."

Jeda lifted an arm, then lowered it. "There are no coppers, Father. I see no other way."

The old man turned to the logger. "Well, Davvik, you get your way. The horses are yours."

Davvik looked at his own feet, then shook his head. "This is not what I want, Hamid. Believe me, I would rather you could keep them." He nodded his head at the great lizards being trained on the far side of the Ring, then up where roustabouts strung supports for the high wire and trapeze. "But neither my wishes nor yours will feed your flyers or beasts."

Hamid nodded. "Take care of them, Davvik."

Jeda walked to Hamid and placed a gentle hand on the old man's shoulder. "I will be there, Father. I'll watch them."

The old man looked up into his son's face. "You go with Davvik?"

Jeda nodded. "I'm a rider, and your circus has no horses."

"I will pay him well, Hamid." Davvik put his arm around Jeda's shoulders. "And if you can get your show going, I'll sell you back the horses."

"Thank you, Davvik."

The logger nodded, then turned to Jeda. "We must go, then."

"Goodbye, Father."

Hamid put his hand over his son's, pressed it and nodded, his eyes closed. He felt the hand leave his shoulder and listened as the two left the Ring.

Koolis shook his head. "After we sprinkle a few movills on our creditors, Davvik's coppers might keep us going another month—perhaps less. What then?"

"My mind is as empty as my purse, Koolis. . . ." The old man looked up and saw a roustabout on the high-wire platform playing at stepping out on the wire. The man stumbled, but quickly caught the post behind the platform. Koolis stood and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Break your neck, fool, and you pay your own funeral."

Koolis turned to see Hamid hobbling off on his crutches. "Hurry, Koolis; assemble the company. Hurry!"

Master Sergeant Levec scanned the indicators and adjusted a control with a feather touch. As the huge machine chewed through the blue-green sulphide vein, an extra drop of oil fell into the crushers dispersing a slight foam accumulation. "You got to keep your eye on that, Balis. Too much foam can really gum up the works."

"I apologize, Sergeant." Balis's hand left the control and reached for the purse beneath his lavender-and-white juggler's robe.

"Get back on that control!" Levec shook his head as the juggler's hand sped back to the steering buttons. "Look, Balis, I thought we had a deal; you don't pay me every time you make a mistake. Just don't make it again."

"Yes, Sergeant. I got confused."

Levec caressed the cab frame he was using for support and patted it. "You'll get the hang of it. In another two weeks, the Montagnes will be back up in the satellites and you boys will be operating the pit."

Balis scanned the controls, indicators and progress track. "We are on the straight, Sergeant."

"Good. You can put it on automatic."

Balis flipped a switch, leaned back in his seat and sighed. "It seems so much to learn in two weeks."

"A little more involved than tossing around a few balls, eh Balis?" The juggler smiled, reached into his robe and produced four red spheres. Levec took them, sighed, and moved to the back of the cab for the additional headroom. A look of determination on his face, the sergeant made sure of his footing, fixed his eyes on the imaginary high point of the trajectory and began pitching the balls. His hands moved with a steady rhythm keeping no less than two balls in the air at once.

"Now, Sergeant, one hand!" Levec threw three complete cycles one-handed before he broke rhythm, dropping the balls. Balis laughed. "You'll get the hang of it."

Levec gathered up the balls and handed them to Balis. "Here."

"Keep them, Sergeant. I brought them for you."

Levec nodded. "Only to pay for your apologies, of course."

"Of course." Balis smiled. "I will miss you when the Montagnes return to the satellites."

Levec opened his utility bag and put the balls in it. Standing again, he nodded at the juggler. "Well, the Montagne must follow its orders." Levec slapped Balis on the shoulder. "But this does not mean we shall never see each other again. A detail will be down every few weeks to do maintenance."

"Still . . ."

"It's been awhile. You better check the indicators." Levec turned and looked through the dusty sideport at the pit. A kilometer across and eight hundred meters deep at its lowest point, the pit resembled a great, stepped bowl. On each step a line of huge processors, connected by water, slurry, and power ducts, chewed their way around the bowl, widening it and producing

copper, silver, iron, and arsenic for the satellite defense rings and orbiting bases of the military mission.

A movement in the pit caught his eye, and Levec reached to the console in front of Balis and slammed an orange panel. Power to the processors stopped. "Sergeant, what is it?"

"Something in the pit. Call it in." As Balis radioed pit control, Levec undogged the side door and stepped out on the catwalk. Far to his right, an enormous green animal was leaping down the steps of the pit. In a matter of seconds, it reached the bottom and began swimming the evil-smelling slurry pond. "Balis! Come out here and bring the monocular." As Balis came through the door, Levec took the monocular and focused on the animal in the pond. "Lookit that! Balis, I swear you can have my stripes if I've ever seen anything like that!"

Balis squinted against the sun. "It is one of the great lizards of Arcadia, Sergeant. I've never seen one out here on the desert so close to Kuumic."

"It's pulling something." Levec played the monocular back along the path the lizard had taken. "It looks like a cable or a rope. Look, at the top of the rim."

Balis took the monocular and focused on the rim. A crowd was gathered, watching the lizard. The other end of the rope appeared to be anchored to a high pole on the edge of the rim. Balis turned. On the opposite edge of the pit, another crowd was gathered. The lizard, having traversed the slurry pond, leaped up the steps to the left, still dragging the rope. As the animal disappeared over the opposite rim, the slack in the rope was taken up. Levec took the monocular and saw the rope being anchored to another high post. A figure climbed the post and stood on top, waving to the crowd. From where he stood, Levec could hear the cheers. The figure was handed a long, white pole. Balancing the pole across the rope, the figure began walking out over the pit. In moments the figure had only air between a swaying, narrow path and certain death. Levec switched to a higher powered lens and saw that the figure was a man; an old man. "Balis, who is that?"

"Sergeant, that is Great Tara of the high-wire Riettas. He is enough to make one's heart stop."

"He's so old." Balis watched Levec move and shift as the Montagne Sergeant walked the rope vicariously with the Great Tara. As he reached the center of the rope, the wind across the pit picked up and snatched at the old man's yellow robe. Levec held his breath as the old man sat down on the rope and leaned his

pole into the wind. The wind gone, the old man did a backwards somersault on the rope, coming up to his feet again. He teetered for an instant, then resumed his walk above the pit. Lifetimes later, the Great Tara stood atop the anchor pole on the other side of the pit. At both ends of the rope a cheer went up, accompanied by signs, each one a letter, spelling **HAMID'S GREATER SHOWS—TARZAK**. Then the crowd was gone. Levec looked at Balis, confused. "They were all with that circus."

"Yes."

"But between Montagnes and trainees, there can't be more than twenty people here in the pit."

"True, Sergeant, but I heard that Tara put on a spectacle yesterday at the microwave relay station by climbing one of the guy wires supporting the broadcast antenna. There were only eight soldiers at the station."

Levec shook his head. "I don't know much about advertising, Balis, but it seems they're going about it the wrong way. Soldiers aren't even allowed planetside." Levec played the monocular along the rope, watching it sway in the wind. "But I sure wish I could see that show."

Balis smiled, entered the cab and pulled some flyers from his robe. In seconds he had them stuffed into Levec's utility bag.

Captain Bostany knew the perspiration running down her back was imaginery, but as she stood at strict attention before General Kahn, while he traced little circles on his command desk with a wicked-looking swagger stick, she swore her boots were filled to overflowing.

Kahn dropped the stick on his desk with a clatter, folded his hands and pursed his lips. "Let's try it one more time, Captain, shall we?"

"I . . . I await the general's pleasure."

Kahn pressed a panel on his desk causing the bulkhead behind him to part, disclosing an activated holographic command reader. "You know what this is I suppose?"

"Yessir."

Kahn smiled. "That will save some time. Captain, as you can see, the Ninth Quadrant Federation has enough hardware in orbit around Momus to destroy utterly any kind of force the Tenth Federation cares to send against us," the General held up a finger, "if, I repeat, if everything is functioning smoothly. With me?"

"Yessir."

Kahn picked up a sheaf of papers from his desk. "These are summary courts' records, Captain. As mission sociological officer, you will be interested to know that the Momus military mission has the worst petty disciplinary rate in the sector."

"Yessir."

"Captain, that includes the Quadrant bases around all three penal colonies!"

"Yessir."

"Captain, the men and women manning this mission are Montagnes, the most professionally disciplined soldiers in the Quadrant forces. This cannot go on. First, I want you to tell me why, then I want to know what you are going to do about it."

"Yessir. The positive soc—"

"So help me, Captain, if you start talking sociological parameters, biofeed responses, or negative poop loops again, I will eat your head off!"

"Well, General, it's a combination of things—that caused the disciplinary problems, that is. The analysis just completed. . ."

"Skip that and get to what it is."

"... ah, yessir. Well, sir, to be overly simplistic about it. . ."

"Impossible."

"...yessir. Well, sir, it's what we call acute environmental awareness."

"That's what you call it; what would I call it?"

"Cabin fever?"

"Go on."

"Well, sir, it's just that the isolation from the planet's surface is beginning to have neg— ah, well, sir, it's beginning to get to the troops."

"Now, Captain, we are at a point we could have reached an hour ago. Cabin fever, huh?"

"Yessir."

"I can think of maybe twenty military missions offhand that are similarly isolated for political reasons, environmental conditions, any number of reasons." The General waved the stack of papers. "None of them has this problem."

"Yessir, I mean, nossir. Everyone brought up on charges so far has undergone analysis to determine the soc— uh, to see if there is a common cause. Using that information, my department conducted additional surveys and found that the pattern extends to dependent families and civilian employees."

"And?"

"Well, sir, it's probably a lot more complicated than it sounds. Doctor Graver, the chief of psych, says that it's probably symbolic for—"

"What is it, Captain?"

"Sir, uh . . . the personnel, they . . . want to go and see the circus."

"Circus."

"Yessir."

Kahn studied an empty spot in the air until Captain Bostany had to break the silence or run screaming from the compartment. "Sir, we traced the information about the circus to the crews operating the relay station, the open-pit mine operations. . ."

"Momus doesn't even have a circus."

Bostany reached into a folder and placed some papers in front of the General. "We obtained these from the crews rotating from planetside."

Kahn studied the flyers and shook his head. "Captain, would you tell me why men, women, and children who have at their disposal a variety of the most sophisticated recreational facilities known to modern science, want to go see a circus?"

"Yessir," Bostany smiled and pulled a bound set of papers from her folder. "I'm writing a paper on it."

"Just *why*, Captain."

"Yessir. Outside of actual sports activities, virtually all of our recreations are remote sensory. There is an unreality about them that leaves unfulfilled certain needs."

"Unreality? Captain, have you ever used a fantasizer? You can climb the Matterhorn if you want, and even be frostbitten."

"Yessir. But, before and after the experience, you know that the experience never was and that no challenge existed. Doctor Graver agrees with me that this phenomenon is actually a reach for reality."

Kahn held up a flyer depicting a huge lizard in pink tights and tassels, holding a small, turban-wrapped boy high over its head with one hand. "You call this reality?"

"That's what it seems to represent to the personnel."

Kahn looked at the flyer and nodded. "I guess it is, for Momus." He looked up. "Your recommendation?"

"General, we have to let mission personnel get in some time planetside on a regular basis to see the circus, go backpacking, or just walk around and breathe fresh air."

"You have another plan? Allenby would kill that one in a

second, and you know why."

"No other plan that is practical. Either get them planetside or replace the entire complement. We ran the sociological progressions, and visiting planetside on a rotating basis would have no adverse impact. The impact Lord Allenby fears happens only if the mission uses planetside bases."

"Your department checked out the fortune teller's story, then?"

"Yessir; and her accuracy is uncanny, except for this. Her recommendation was complete separation. It's strange that she could be so accurate with one and miss so badly on the other. But, she's hardly a computer."

Kahn snorted out a short laugh. "Tayla the fortune teller has Allenby's ear; your computer doesn't." Kahn reached for the communicator built into his desk. "Get me Ambassador Humphries." He turned back to Bostany. "Put together the best case you can, Captain. You are about to meet the cashiered former Ambassador and present Statesman of Momus, Great Allenby, magician and newsteller." Kahn shrugged. "Part of that reality we're reaching for, I imagine."

While Captain Bostany explained her sociological progression tables, charts and diagrams, Allenby looked at the people seated on cushions around his table. Ambassador Humphries, as usual, scowled impatiently. Seated next to the Ambassador, General Kahn remained properly impassive. Across from Allenby, Hamid of the Miira riders looked at the center of the table, seeing nothing. Next to Hamid, Tayla the fortune teller watched Bostany's performance through hooded eyes. Bostany collected her papers and concluded: "Therefore, Lord Allenby, while the complete separation protects Momus from undesirable socio-impact, it is having an undesirable impact on the military mission. As I have repeated, my department has determined that there will be no adverse impacts as a result of limited interaction between—"

"No!" Tayla held up her hands, palms toward Allenby. "I have seen what will be and what can be, Great Allenby. I say that the soldiers must stay in the sky."

Allenby shrugged. "Then, Ambassador Humphries, that is my answer. The mission personnel remain off planet."

"Lord Allenby; be reasonable, man. Captain Bostany is more than qualified to determine whether or not there will be problems from limited contact. She has the command of the latest computerized investigation tools. Against this, you would take the word

of a spiritualist?"

"Humphries, from birth Tayla has been trained to absorb information, associate it, weigh probabilities, and project outcomes given a certain set of circumstances. There is nothing spiritual about it. She couldn't tell you how she arrives at a particular conclusion, but I can tell you the conclusions are accurate. I think the general can support what I say."

Kahn nodded. "I saw Tayla observe our original occupation and defense plan of Momus, then point by point list the sociological results. This has since been verified by Captain Bostany—that is, except the need for complete separation, as I think she has shown."

Allenby nodded at Bostany. "Captain, I do not doubt your qualifications. However, a skilled fortune teller can do anything your computers can do, and a lot faster. In addition, Tayla knows Momus. There must be a factor, some seemingly unimportant fact, you failed to include. Mission personnel will not come planetside."

"Great Allenby." He turned to see Hamid looking at him through hazy blue eyes. The old rider's face was tired as death. "Great Allenby, I beg you. If the soldiers do not come down, the circus will die. We have been open now for only three nights, and already the tiers at the Great Ring are half-filled. The main attractions cannot continue without the soldiers."

"You have heard Tayla speak. Can I sacrifice the way of an entire planet's life for the sake of a few attractions?"

"I would ask Great Tayla a question." Hamid turned to the fortune teller. "Great Tayla, how is it that a few soldiers visiting my circus will destroy us when the ancestors of Momus, the old circus, traveled among worlds of strangers for many centuries?"

Tayla closed her eyes. "I see what I see."

Allenby stood. "Then, if there is nothing else?"

Hamid pulled himself along on his crutches until he stood in the light coming from the Great Ring. Still outside the spectators' entrance, he could not bring himself to enter. Moving to the side to stand alone in the dark, the old man listened to the music coming from within. He watched the pitifully few customers walking up and down the midway, peeking into the stalls and tents, reading the signs and listening to the barkers. The side attractions were falling off as well. But, thought Hamid, it is nothing to them. When the circus dies, they will play the squares and fires as before. But for us . . . He stood back in the entrance and for a

moment watched Tessia and her parents high above the sawdust. He turned away. For us there will be no tomorrow. As a cheer erupted from the Ring, Hamid lifted his eyes to see a fortune teller's stall. Inside, a lone woman in the blue robe sat playing solitaire, unmindful of the noise and music. Hamid thought, shook his head, and thought again. It was so simple. Smacking his head, he hobbled off in the darkness.

"Great Tayla." Hamid nodded his head.

The old fortune teller squinted at him from her place at her table, then nodded. "Enter, Hamid. Be seated." The old man hobbled into the dark room, propped his crutches against the wall and lowered himself to the single cushion before Tayla's table. On the table, a single oil lamp illuminated the room. "What brings you?"

"It is your greatness that brings me."

She read the old man's eyes, disliking what she saw there. "Be clear, old rider."

Hamid nodded. "The captain fortune teller of the soldiers does not understand. I did not either."

"Understand?"

"Great Allenby spoke truly when he said you could do anything the captain's machines could do, and at greater speed." Hamid grinned. "But, our Statesman did not honor you enough."

"Get on with what you have come to say, Hamid."

"Great Tayla, you can do something the captain's machines cannot."

"Which is?"

"You can lie."

Tayla's face froze. "I told what I saw. All those soldiers and others here on Momus, they would absorb us. We, our way of life, would cease to be. It is the truth!"

Hamid nodded. "As much of it as is told. But the bases, all those soldiers, live up in the orbiting bases and stations. Our way of life is safe from them."

"No!" Tayla shook her head. "They must stay there; We can be safe only if they stay off Momus—all of them."

Hamid rubbed his chin. "Tayla, what did you see of the circus, if the soldiers only visited? You saw the circus born again, didn't you?"

Tayla closed her eyes. "I am tired, Hamid. Leave me."

"You saw it born again."

"Yes!" Tayla flinched at the loudness of her own voice. "Yes,

but that only among other things . . . ”

“You saw riders, high-wire walkers, flyers, great beast and jungle acts standing where they have not been for many years; center ring, main attractions . . . ”

“Hamid, there is more.”

“Yes, you saw more, Tayla. You saw fortune tellers tucked away in a little stall off the midway—sideshows, reading palms and leaves, telling the rubes what they would like to hear.”

The old woman’s eyes brimmed with tears. “Old man, Allenby will listen only to what I say.”

“What if I took this to your daughter Salina? She is respected. What would her visions be? What if I took this to all the great fortune tellers on Momus? Allenby will not believe the captain, but would he believe ten, fifty, or a hundred fortune tellers?”

“They will see the same things I saw.”

The old man shrugged. “Perhaps not. They are younger; perhaps they will be able to see beyond a vision of a sideshow.”

Tayla laughed. “What can you tell me about what they would see, old rider?”

“I think they would see that fortune telling has changed since the days Momus was first settled. Riders, flyers, trainers, are the same as we were. But fortune telling has changed. It has grown. Great men and women of business come and sit before your table to hear the future and make their plans. You have outgrown the circus. I think they will see that.”

The old woman frowned, then reached beneath her table and withdrew a clear glass sphere. She placed it on the table and adjusted the oil lamp. She sat for only a moment, staring deep within the glass, then closed her eyes and nodded. “I did not look beyond that vision. Understand my loyalty to the fortune tellers, Hamid. I saw this, and—”

“And lied!” Hamid gripped the edge of the table and pushed himself to his feet. He took his crutches, placed them under his arms and turned toward Tayla. “You will tell Allenby?”

Tayla looked into the old man’s angry face. “Yes, I will tell him.” Hamid hobbled toward the door. “Hamid?”

He turned to face her. “Yes?”

“I am ashamed. But tonight in Great Allenby’s quarters, I saw an old cripple prepared to destroy an entire people, just to put his son on a horse. Is my shame any greater than his?”

Hamid looked at the old woman, then bowed his head. “No, Great Tayla. You see better into my own heart than I do.”

"It is my trade."

Hamid looked at her and smiled. "Do I owe you for this visit?"

The old woman smiled and shook her head. "No Hamid; I think we are even. Must you go?"

Hamid laughed. "Yes. I must see a man about a horse."

Allenby bid Koolis, Master of the Ring, goodbye and turned his attention to the tiers packed with Montagne soldiers, civilians and, best of all, hordes of excited, wide-eyed children. The Ring stood brightly in the glow of eight searchlights General Kahn supplied to replace the rows of oil lamps, while from the bandstand, the musicians delivered a lusty march in preparation for the Great Parade. Disus, Allenby's chief-of-staff, walked up and stood beside him next to the Ring. "A marvelous spectacle, is it not?"

Allenby nodded. "The man behind this, however, is the real marvel. Koolis told me that Hamid began this without a movill in his purse; yet look at the acts he has assembled and the audience he has attracted."

Disus shrugged and waved an idle hand at the soldiers. "If Hamid cannot go to the Montagne . . ."

"Don't finish that if you value your life. See to our seats." Grinning, Disus bowed and went off to negotiate for seating space.

Opposite the entrance, high on the last tier, an old man leaned on a crutch and surveyed the amphitheater. Before the night's show, Koolis had stood before him shaking his head. "Every last percentage of the gate has been exchanged for acts, food, materials, and supplies. I keep the accounts, Hamid. No matter the success; you will not find yourself a movill richer."

"I have my reward, Koolis," he had said.

The Master of the Ring shrugged and shook his head. "A high price to pay for sentiment, my friend."

"It is not sentiment."

"What then is your reward? I do not understand." Koolis left, shaking his head and fondling his fat purse.

As the Great Parade began, the old man leaned forward to see four brothers in silver-spangled tights mounted on four gleaming white stallions enter the Ring at the head of the parade. Four brothers—whose sons and daughters will ride, and all their sons and daughters after them.

"Yes, Koolis," the old man whispered, "my fortune is made."

THE THREE ROBOTS OF PROFESSOR TINKER

by Martin Gardner

Professor Lyman Frank Tinker, head of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Stanford University, was the twenty-first century's top designer of robots. One afternoon, for a seminar test, he brought to the classroom three female robots, all young, attractive, unclothed, and absolutely identical in appearance. He seated them on three chairs in front of the class.

"One of these girls," said Professor Tinker, "is programmed always to speak truly. Another is programmed always to lie. The third is programmed so she sometimes speaks truly, sometimes falsely. The decision is made by an internal randomizer. Your problem is this. In how few questions can you identify the truther, the liar, and the sometimier?"

The second smartest student in the class asked the following three questions:

1. To the lady on the left he said, "Who sits next to you?" The robot answered: "The truther."

2. To the center lady he said, "Who are you?" The robot answered: "The sometimier."

3. To the lady on the right he said, "Who sits next to you?" The robot answered: "The liar."

From the three answers the student correctly identified all three robots. How did he do it? See page 85 for the answer.



ON THE Q167 FILE

by John M. Ford

art: Alex Schomburg



The author of this peculiar research paper has a somewhat drooping, blond moustache and a pronounced Midwestern accent. He currently has a sword-&-sorcery novel in preparation.

The Informed Reader must certainly be aware of the public furor over "Recombinant-DNA" experimentation, in which the genetic material of an organism is chemically engineered to produce a desired mutation. One possible product of this research would be bacteria capable of creating protein molecules, such as that of insulin, in any desired quantity or type.

I will not here discuss hypothetical "super-plagues" produced by cackling mad scientists, as this topic has recently become somewhat sensitive politically.¹ My concern here is rather with a possible byproduct of this research, which threatens the livelihood of all creative typists such as myself.

An example will prove instructive here. The reader is no doubt familiar with the *Gedachtexperiment*² in which monkeys are placed at typewriters and allowed to hit keys randomly, until the entire contents of the Library of Congress are produced.

As can readily be seen, these auctorial apes are no threat to any body of writers.³ The noted logomathematician Hakluyt proved that no real-world process could type *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* in less time than is required to criticize it,⁴ setting up an infinitely recursive series clearly demonstrating that the sun will go nova and Achilles catch Zeno's tortoise before the

monkeys reach the second appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*.⁵

But—what if the process were *not* random? A protein molecule is a twisted string of amino acid molecules, even as a sentence is a string of words and a word a string of letters. Suppose, as was proposed at the Rückwärts Conference,⁶ a code were espoused relating amino acids to letters of the alphabet: e.g. alanine for A, asparagine for B, aspartic acid for C, et cetera;⁷ and now imagine a DNA-engineered bacterium, programmed with sentence structure and a rudimentary grasp of grammar,⁸ spinning out genetically-coded fiction by the line, by the page, at undreamed-of speeds. Replication by Transfer-RNA and reverse transcriptase might make the "Xerox revolution" look like a wet firecracker.

For some years now, researchers have dismissed such prophecies as baseless speculation. Hakluyt's Original Proof⁹ showed that the available number of α -amino acids was insufficient to encode all 26 letters of the alphabet, not to mention punctuation marks and underlining, confining so-called Bacterial Literature to certain limited forms such as nurse novels and the poetry of e.e. cummings.

But two recent breakthroughs have pushed this defense aside. Scientists working at the University of Hawaii Research Center and Temple of Pélé at Mauna Loa Crater have produced entire chapters by utilizing the Hawaiian language, which uses only 14 letters.¹⁰

The proposed EK3 safeguards, which would have rendered all Hawaiian translators incapable of survival outside the laboratory, were then bypassed when the Everett Dirksen Memorial Laboratory at the University of Southern Indiana at Bedford showed, in a remarkable interdisciplinary study, that by using *pairs* of amino acids as coding elements, the symbol-carrying capacity could be tremendously increased.¹¹

An additional alarming development of this finding is that it negates the Russian research handicap of a greater number of characters in the Cyrillic alphabet.¹²

Can any of the proposed safety measures be made to work? Can a P4 ultrasafe laboratory, with its airlocks, special eyeglasses, and staff chosen for their lack of literary pretensions, be maintained in an environment teeming with \$1.95 paperbacks and four-pound editions of the *New York Times*? The consequences of admitting even one Evelyn Wood graduate could be staggering.

But perhaps more technologies are not the answer. The true solution may lead us full circle to Man himself,¹³ to human pro-

ductivity and the will to succeed. After all, Sir Alexander Fleming's discovery of Penicillin did not greatly change our opinion of moldy fruit. Surely Man,¹⁴ with his native gifts of ten-finger touch typing and dry copying, can outproduce a jar full of bugs.¹⁵

Indeed, man has and will continue to fulfill his poetic aspirations¹⁶ without the putative aid of organic chemistry.¹⁷ A moment's reflection brings to mind men writ large, men of prodigious output covering every field of human endeavor, combining the writer, the lecturer,¹⁸ and the scholar, bearing advanced degrees in such fields as . . . ah . . . er . . .

Biochemistry?

1. As is well known, Transylvania is now a Warsaw Pact country.
2. German word meaning "No funding available."
3. With the possible exception of television writers.
4. Actually Hakluyt's *Other* Proof. The distinction is fine but noteworthy. Some have disputed the Theorem on the empirical grounds that Hakluyt's formulae dealt directly only with *Swann's Way* and were extrapolated to the general, or $n=7$, case.
5. Or Notes toward the modular *Triton*.
6. Held each year at Mr. Janos Rückwärts' Institute for Persons Easily Confused by Facts.
7. Additional codings are left as a challenge to the reader.
8. As most bacteria reproduce by fission, split infinitives may be a problem.
9. There it is! See the difference?
10. Reported in *Hukilau and Public Affairs*, the Bulletin of the Volcano Worshipers. While released fragments of the novel, which deals with lava flows and existential doubt, show no great literary merit, the complete work has been purchased for an undeclared sum by Dino de Laurentiis.
11. Paper, "Multiplying Two Things Together Makes A Lot More Things Out Of Them," EDML/USIB no. 3192.
12. The much-talked-of "six-character gap." It was believed by several observers that the lack of articles in Russian grammar was an attempt to

circumvent this difficulty. See also Shyster, L., *The Inflection Conspiracy*, recounting the Soviet attempt to steal American sentence-structure secrets.

13. Or Woman herself. I'm not one to risk my NSF grant.

14. See Note 13.

15. At three cents a word, he'd better.

16. Note to printer: This appeared in galleys as "fill the paperback racks." Please correct in final copy.

17. A small exception being made for C_2H_5OH , a catalyst of interesting properties in ink-paper reactions.

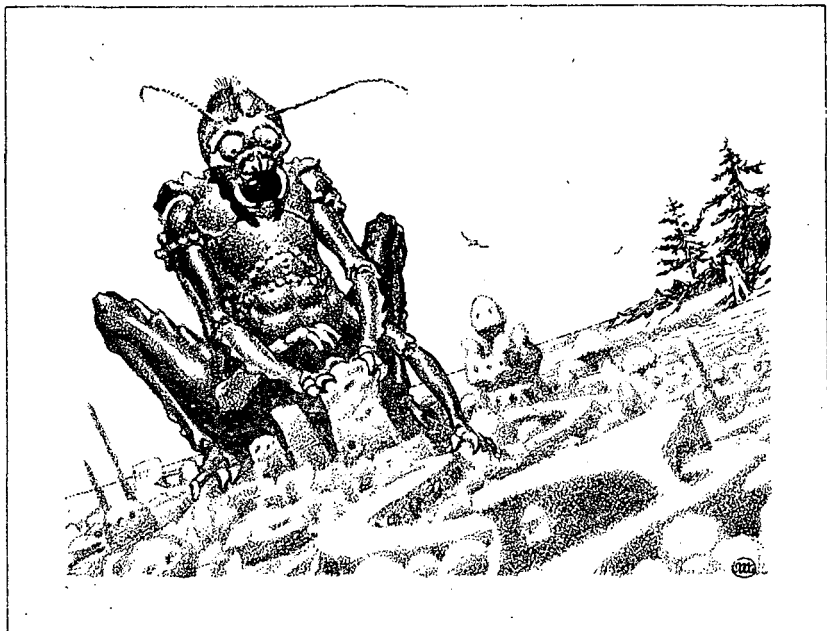
18. Note to printer: please spell correctly in final copy.



SOFTLY TOUCH THE STRANGER'S MIND

by E. Amalia Andujar

art: Michael Whelan



While the author still thinks of Chicago, a city in which she spent many years, as Home, she presently lives and works in New Haven CT, accompanied by her dog, Emily. (Emily, she notes, is not gainfully employed.) Ms. Andujar's work involves a laboratory and studies of chemical kinetics, which she claims "will kill her one of these days." Whether the reference is to the studies, the work, or the laboratory is not recorded. This story is her first sale.

"We are curious, Johalla. It has always been so. If there is a mountain, we will climb it. It will not remain untouched by us. And so it is with space. It is there. We must know what is in it."

The storm had been violent. The onslaught had permitted no time for evasive action.

The hull of the ship, as durable as anything in the universe, had not been damaged, but the shields had weakened, exposing delicate instruments to radiation. Sparks flashed from the panel. The odor of fused circuits tainted the air. Amber lights warned of danger.

Johalla disengaged relays, releasing the ship from automatic control. It responded sluggishly as he brought it about in a wide arc.

Before the advent of the storm, he had finished surveying a solar system. Deep within it, scans had revealed a planet compatible to the physiology of his species. Probes had also identified areas of dense population.

A pinpoint of light appeared in the monitor. As the ship drew nearer, the dot swelled, illuminating the screen.

Johalla coaxed the vessel into orbit around the globe, frantically searching the surface for an island. It was not as likely to be inhabited. One does not set down a disabled craft in the midst of a teeming metropolis.

"Remember, my friend, aliens are not predictable. They feel threatened by our presence. As often as they turn and flee, they will attack. Time has given little knowledge of the beings which populate this galaxy."

He cut into the planet's atmosphere, guiding the ship toward the small target. It skimmed the glassy-smooth water. Flip-flopping out of control, the vessel slashed across the island, plunged through the trees, smashing them to fibers.

The impact was shattering. It paralyzed him, suspended him in a well of pain. He moaned, waited unmoving for the hurt to subside, for silence to calm his battered senses.

Johalla fumbled with the harness, his aching claws catching the fabric of the protective garment which covered his angular frame. He pulled at it. Without it, fragments of shell and a green puddle would be the only remains of this creature who had dared to trespass against the galaxy.

He groped for the portal, hesitating before he released the cover. Every living being here must know of his arrival.

He pushed the hatch forward, peering out into the dusk. Strange forms intrigued him. He studied the terrain, eyes lingering on the trees, their silhouettes black against the heavens. His antennae quivered in harmony to the sounds and smells of the island.

Weary, he turned from all of it and sought comfort in dreamless sleep.

Noisy chattering awakened him. The forest, streaked by dawn, shivered with life. Johalla climbed from the ship.

The cool wind caressed his thorax, soothed his aching limbs. The surf rolling against the rocky shore seemed to echo his isolation. He looked at stately trees, at small creatures stalking the sky on fragile wings.

"How awesome it is to press one's feet against alien soil. How different it is, yet the same. The essence of the universe is there. To reach out and touch it; if only one could reach out and draw it in."

He cut branches from the trees torn by the ship's passage and formed a leafy shroud, shielding the vessel from view. He knew nothing of the inhabitants of this world, but many races throughout the galaxy were capable of mechanized flight.

Each instrument was checked for damage, a chore hampered by the confines of the ship. With the panels removed and the units spread about, there was little room for him.

His discomfort increased with the heat. The environmental system had been shut down, which left the air stagnant and heavy with the odor of scorched insulation.

At sunset, Johalla nibbled rations to appease gnawing hunger and watched the clouds gathering overhead.

Huge drops splattered the ground, dissolving into rivulets at his feet. Johalla shivered. The misty rains which refreshed his planet were nothing like this downpour.

He was fascinated by the thunder, the frenzy of the wind, the blinding sheets of water. Tentacles of fire flashed in the sky, driving him to the refuge of the ship. He wished for someone to share with him the excitement of these phenomena.

"It is not our nature to be alone, Johalla, but is the price of our endless missions into that dark void. Memories are as precious

jewels. Memories will sustain you, when isolation numbs your thoughts."

Puddles were now the only remnants of the storm. The morning was crisp with pungent odors, the foliage more vibrantly colored, but he had little time to ponder the beauty of nature. He returned to his tasks, laboring again until dusk.

The evening, so calm after yesterday's violence, aroused him. His spirits sent him prancing along the beach, dashing back and forth across the sand, teasing the waves.

Lured from his game by the forest, he ran among the trees, leaping over vines and bushes until the odor of burning wood halted his carefree journey. He stopped and sniffed the air.

The smoky wisps led him through the undergrowth to a clearing among the trees. In the center, logs burned brightly, casting shadows upon the barren ground. Johalla looked about him, seeking the cause of the strange patterns which stroked his mind. He discovered he was not alone.

The animal crouched near the fire. Slowly, it straightened, tense with fear.

Johalla's wings fluttered. He stumbled back into the shadows. His powerful legs sent him high into the trees.

From above, he watched the biped as it circled the clearing, thrashing the undergrowth with a stick. It was a small, frail beast. The soft, pulpy body, the pallor of its flesh made Johalla shudder.

Light swept the thick vegetation. Johalla dodged the beam. His eyes would mirror the ray a hundred-fold, exposing him.

The bough sagged beneath his weight. Needle-shaped growths tickled his abdomen. He pushed at them with his feet. The tree trembled with his every movement.

The animal continued to pace, twisting and jerking its head, wagging a response to the probing fingers of Johalla's mind. He could sense its terror.

The night seemed endless. His legs were stiff with cramps. With gentle thoughts, he tried to lull the creature from its frantic search.

Finally, the creature slumped against a tree, exhausted. It lay there, defenseless, a fragile orphan of the universe.

He climbed down. Branches swayed and broke under his weight. His great agility saved him from crashing to the ground in an undignified heap. Quietly, he made his way through the

forest, back to the ship.

"Although we seek them out, Johalla, we have yet to form a bond between ourselves and other species. How does one greet a stranger? What is the common ground on which we all might tread? What splendid gesture will forge the link?"

The sun was warm against his iridescent skin. Johalla tinkered with an instrument, carefully tuning its sensitive elements. Bored with the task, he set it down.

Memories nagged him. His actions last night had been those of a coward. The creature had been no threat to him. He was taller, stronger, but he had not faced it boldly. His noble feet had taken flight faster than his noble thoughts. His failure was no greater than that of his friends, but still, it was no less.

The undergrowth rustled, stopping his thoughts. Twigs snapped. The scent of fear was carried by the wind. Alert, Johalla watched the trees.

The animal leaped into the clearing, a black cylinder extending from an upper limb. Rigid with defiance, the native faced Johalla, exploding with hatred. Flame burst from the outstretched cylinder.

Johalla sprawled to the ground, his back smarting where the missile glanced off the bony ridge between his wings. He was uninjured, but stunned by the attack.

It fired again and again. Johalla's claws clicked in irritation, his head throbbed with anger. He tapped the weapon hanging at his belt, pulled it out, aiming it at a clump of bushes. They were blasted to ashes.

The creature scrambled through the trees, howling in terror.

The native's behavior had provoked Johalla's rage, but his retaliation sickened him. His mood was dark with shame.

The animal could not translate his thoughts. It feared him. The signals from its mind were sharp, hot spikes of passion, wounding his pride.

"When fear is present, one cannot communicate. It blinds, smothers expression of all other emotions and thoughts. To cut beyond that veil and softly touch the stranger's mind, to share its joys and sorrows..."

The chill of twilight calmed him, driving the demons from his

soul. He walked briskly, scanning the beach with keen eyes. The sands were cold beneath his feet. He quickened his steps. He had found what he was seeking.

It was a small tub made from tree fibers. The marks were still clear where it had been dragged from the water onto the beach.

He leaned over it, exploring the interior with his claws. He discovered a jagged hole, low in the bow. Perhaps this broken vessel had carried the native to the island. It must have been stranded here by the storm, unable to reach a safer port.

The device attached to the vessel's side reeked of hydrocarbons. Intrigued by it, Johalla ran his claw along the shaft, spinning the hard blades of the fan. Once, such primitive things had been common to his world, but now they were part of history.

"Our ancestors burrowed in mud. We build our shelters from plastic. Our life is hewn from molecules and atoms tailored to our wishes. And yet we are the same beings we were aeons ago, Johalla."

"We seek them out, our galactic kin, compelled to share our future with another race. We have no other reason for existing."

The odor of burning wood drifted across the beach. The image of the strange creature, squatting near the flames to warm itself, distressed him. Its loneliness somehow touched him, magnified his own feelings of isolation. He would not leave it here to die, with no companion to hear its lonely cries. Tomorrow he would mend the little tub.

At daybreak, Johalla returned with tools and adhesives. He covered the jagged hole with mesh, sealing it to the wood with plastic, carefully pressing the sticky substance into the crevices.

Flowers swayed in the gentle breeze, waiting for the sun's hot rays to awaken them. Graceful forms swooped above the water, stabbing the surface with yellow noses. The sea murmured quietly to the sky. This island pleased him.

Again the rustle of leaves and snapping twigs announced the stranger's presence. A deafening roar split the air. Johalla groaned in exasperation.

Claws snapping in anger, he sprinted across the beach in pursuit of the fleeing native.

The creature staggered and fell before it could reach safety. Johalla snatched the loathsome cylinder from its grasp. The animal cowered at Johalla's feet, moaning, its thoughts red with hor-

ror. The sting of its hatred filled him with despair. He turned from the animal, walked back to the tub, dragging the weapon behind him.

"We have accomplished nothing. So much time spent in that cold emptiness, with only rocks and stones to mark our journeys. How vain we are to think that other beings would wish to call us friends.

"Their existence intensified my loneliness. The portals to their minds seem forever closed against us. I longed to return home. It was like a magnet drawing me back from the stars. I had to submit to it. It will happen to you, Johalla. You will come home one day and never go back out there again."

Johalla applied another coat of plastic to the tub. Later, he would check the craft for leakage. The alien stayed near the trees, watching him as he worked. He tried to ignore it; its wrath, its raging thoughts.

Memories of youthful games tugged at his soul, combing out the anger and the hurt. He traced circles in the sand with his feet and molded wet grains into mounds of various sizes and shapes.

He listened to the cries of the small winged beasts hovering near the water. He remembered other places from his past, their citizens shrouded in mystery, alien and unyielding.

He fashioned castles like the dwellings he had seen in a distant land, dug rivers, paved the winding streets with pebbles from the shore. With tiny bits of wood he bridged the make-believe canals.

He was pleased with his creation, as much as he had been in his youth when he had made his dreams from mud and clay. To-day, however, no guardian would chastise him for tracking soil into the tunnels.

A shadow crossed his fantasy, pulling him back from his childish retreat. He found himself staring into the eyes of the native, not knowing how long he had been watched. The patterns of its mind were smooth now, untinted by distrust. It moved slowly to Johalla's side.

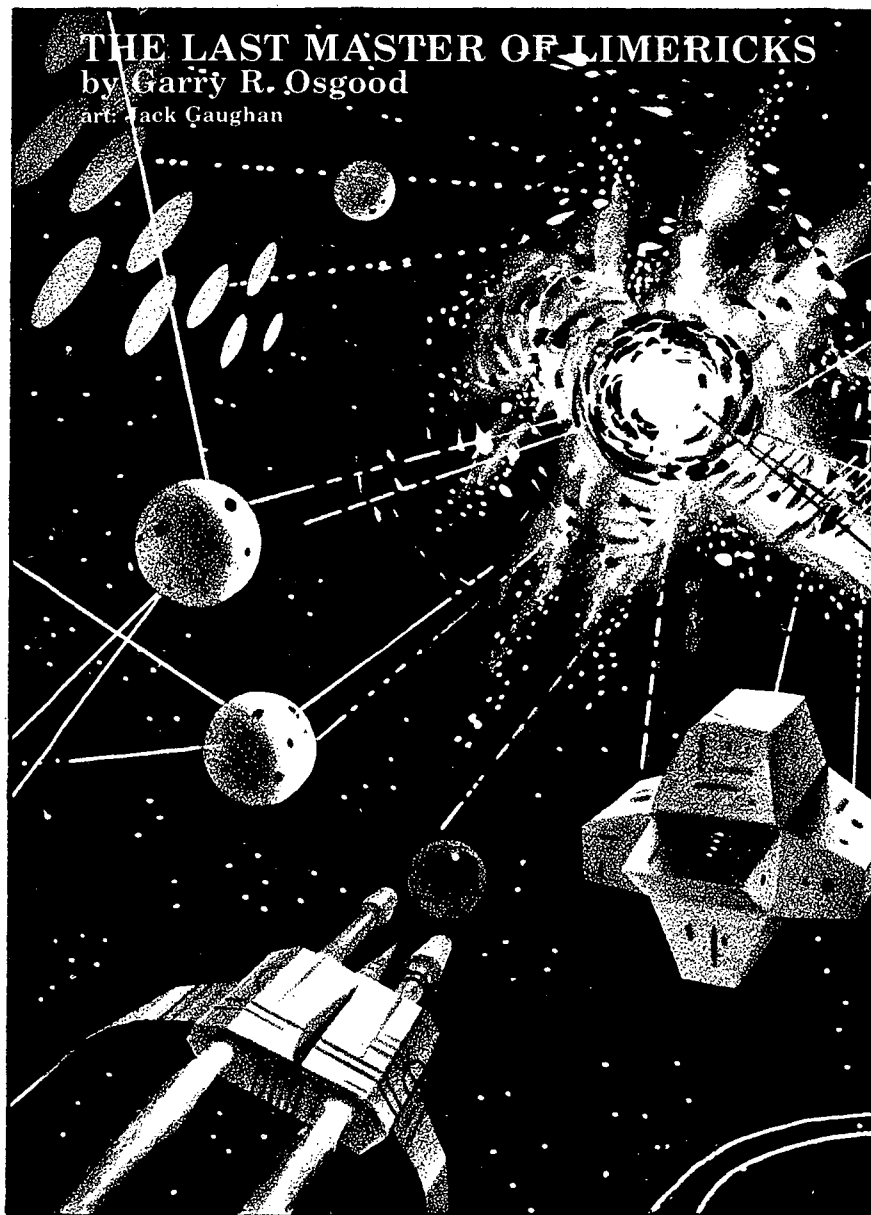
It built its own castles from the sand and placed them among Johalla's, then surrounded them all with a miniature forest of leafy twigs.

When darkness came, they gathered wood and shared the warmth of a fire. Johalla's thoughts flowed with the rhythm of the sea. Softly, he touched the stranger's mind; his joy was echoed in the pounding surf.

THE LAST MASTER OF LIMERICKS

by Garry R. Osgood

art. Jack Gaughan





*Enclosed is a tale made to fit
The ends I am listing, to wit:
To bemuse and confuse
The wisest Old Muse
And brighten my checkbook a bit.*
—Garry R. Osgood

Ping!

And I was awake.

And I was awake and feeling feet and toes and fingers and torso, and I felt hungry—

And I was awake.

Ping!

Why?

Ping!

Slowly, the feeling of feet and toes and fingers and torso ebbed, along with the hunger. They were illusions. I always had them upon waking, those illusions—

Ping!

And I noticed the warning. The warning. A warning. Incredible, but when I was built they had said I would last forever, something I have often doubted, but I had made it that far, far enough to receive yet *another* warning—

Ping!

“Deliver me from this mindless, pointless, objectless, sightless purposeless—” I cut the thought off and willed a request for information:

As a piece of information in itself, the request appeared as a change of firing characteristics in a few thousand neurons deep within the biological portion of Holistics OPERations Alpha. The information did not remain in this portion of HOPE Alpha very long, as my builders were more familiar with electronic engineering. Affected dendrites threaded into an interface device, and out of the other ‘end’ of the device, interrupt instructions were jammed onto a data bus, causing the interface processor to table one routine and call forth another.

As a piece of information in itself, the request appeared transformed from this interface processor and proceeded as a name of a

program to a central processor deep under a mountain range once known as the Rockies. The central processor of TERRAn Defense loaded the program and found instructions which opened data paths to giant radio telescopes in places once known as Green Bank, West Virginia-Jodrell Bank, England; and others. Along such data paths information and the names of programs flowed.

Thus did my will blossom forth.

And the blossom folded within itself, as all blossoms do.

The computers at each telescope disgorged, along with other matters, changes which interplanetary probes and extraterrestrial devices had found disturbing, and through silent radio bands, information from every continent streamed into one continent, into one mountain range, into one processor, into one section, into me, me: deep under rocky slopes where pumas prowl through alpine shrubs and granite outcroppings, unmolested while they lie sunning themselves.

And in that one section, HOPE Alpha, where the biological system rests in its solution, and in one section of that biological system, where a number of neurons were once concerned with seeing prowling pumas, alpine shrubs, and granite outcroppings, a model was built up and frozen permanently: a planetary tableau—with something else.

I could see that Pluto was outside of Neptune again. It had been through one and a half of its cold slow years since the last time I had been warned of intruders. This somehow pleased me: the disturbances were becoming more and more infrequent.

The disturbances were many things—how many, I could not be certain. They shared nearly equivalent orbits—eccentric, markedly tilted with regard to the plane of the ecliptic, and of a long period—centuries long. I knew of nothing which should have been there at that place and time, so I became interested. I caused a long string of data to flow from TERRAD.

"They are of intelligent manufacture," TERRAD told me in effect.

Almost unconsciously, I willed a process which caused the drifting sands of Mars to be lit with rockets' red glare, which caused the reactivation of long dormant radar installations in the Jovian system, which caused—after a very long while—the drawing forth of neutron dampers from a nuclear pile. This caused electrons to race through resistive circuits, and, slowly, giant and remote engines began to warm toward operating levels. To an outsider—to the intruders perhaps—the solar system might seem like a great

awakening beast. In many respects it was, and I was too.

As curiosity stirred my being, I sat back in my fictional chair and palmed my fictional chin within my fictional hand. I thought my thoughts and waited.

When I was built they had said I would last forever, something I have often doubted. Still, it is not for me to reason why, it's just for me to do or die. I'm just a planetary defense system, after all, and my sole official concern is to keep Terra intact, allowing Terrans to do what they please.

Still, that was a presumptuous statement, phrased to impress the thoughtless. You see, there are limits to everything, one way or another. In between hostilities—a good long spell, nowadays—I let myself wax philosophical and contemplate my boundaries.

It's the human in me, the biological system in the nutrient chamber in HOPE Alpha, that makes me philosophical I suppose. It belonged to a mathematician and social philosopher who, nonetheless, held the State in imperfect esteem. No matter. He died for the greater glory of the State. The blob which was he is a limit, for instance. It grows. With every thought, it grows. The proper genetic adjustments have been made, and there is now no limiting skull, so it grows, yet the surrounding nutrient chamber is only so large, and that is a limit, so likewise, I am a limited creature, inexorably wedded to this lonely solar system, and I can last only as long as my most ephemeral part. And what happens after that? I don't know, but once I spent eons contemplating my limits. Everything's got limits.

Except interstellar war, that is. Interstellar warfare has no limits, for the same reason my peripherals are so sluggish: Einstein's Legacy.

Ambrose Bierce defined the boundaries of warfare—peacetime—as a period of cheating between two periods of fighting. In order for two parties to agree upon a change of activity, from cheating to fighting or vice-versa, some kind of communication has to take place, even if it's just by means of a blunt instrument.

Now communicating through space incurs certain lag factors, proportional to the distance over which communication takes place; a blessing courtesy of the finite quantity c . As lag factors delay information sent, making it less and less relevant to any matter at hand, the information becomes meaningless, and meaninglessness is a manifestation of noise. In fact, at a sufficient distance, *any* attempt to communicate simply results in noise.

A case in point: Terra once radioed Alpha Centauri its wishes to cease hostilities. The information, travelling at c , was received by the Alpha Centaurians about four years later, and they agreed, sending a return message to such an effect. Eight years after they had initiated the overture, the Terrans had cause to celebrate.

But a third party, traditionally sympathetic to Terra and twenty lightyears out, acted upon sympathies twenty years out of date and leveled a number of cities belonging to the Fenachrones, an indigenous population around Alpha Centauri. They reacted in a fit of righteous indignation, and began a war which resulted in my manufacture.

Now multiply the number of parties by a factor of ten and you'll gain an approximate feel of interstellar hostilities. There's just no point to interstellar wars: they go on and on without meaning, without logistics, with attack forces going aimlessly about doing what attack forces do. Which gives me a job, I suppose, for otherwise I'd be nothing but a rabble-rousing mathematician.

Thus, as curiosity stirred my sluggish peripherals, I sat my fictional self back in my fictional seat, awaited words on the objects of 'intelligent manufacture', and nursed my suspicions and expectations.

Ping!

And I stirred.

Ping!

And it was too early—too early by hours for results. No, the radio signals received by Jodrell Bank *et alia* were not from my research peripherals; they were from the somethings of intelligent manufacture. I opened a communication channel; I heard:

"Surrender, Earthlings! Or we Fenachrones will utterly destroy your civilization! Amassed within your system now are . . ." and they went on and on with a list of superlatives. I listened for awhile, grew bored, and eventually transmitted:

"Hold it."

"... impenetrable . . ."

"Hold it—now *hold* it, dammit—SHADDUP!"

"... force-fields, nineteen thousand nuclear missiles with a potential energy content . . ."

"HOLD IT! NOW SHADDUP!" I have little patience with lag factors, but eventually they got the first 'hold it'.

"... of—eh? Do you want to surrender?"

"No, I don't want to surrender. That's not the point, I think you ought to know—"

"Then you wish to fight."

"No!" I complained, "That's not the point either. You see, it's not a question of whether I want to defend Terran civilization or not; it's a question of—"

"You either fight or fail."

"Look, I think you ought to know—"

"Fight or fail?"

I tried, really, I tried, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise, and, for some reason, they hadn't looked for themselves, so when they slipped within the orbit of Neptune I had to fight them. I'm a planetary defense system, after all, and the State which had created me was more interested in planetary defense than abstract notions of free will. I had to fight them, pointless or not, and my philosophical interests in life after limits were purely incidental.

Perhaps there were no limits to pointlessness either, but I radioed:

"Remember, I tried to warn you!"

"Ha!" they said, "Then fight!"

In the few days it took that conversation to transpire, I had amassed a considerable pile of preparation. The system-wide beast was fully awake now, and its major industrial centers high in Terran orbit had begun to turn out ships and missiles and lasers and bombs and explosives and radioactives, and the Luna-Martian-Terran traffic ferried commodities back and forth without human intervention, transporting iron ore, mineral products and radioactive fuels; yet this titanic activity, this stupendous expenditure of energies, troubled the Terran surface not one iota. The surface's quiet green peace far exceeded the expectations of the utopian planners which the State had employed many years ago. The jewel I guarded remained truly at peace.

At my level, preparations were largely concerned with tissue growth on the biological system encased within HOPE Alpha. In the weeks that followed, I would be living intensely indeed, and many would be the memories which would be impressed there.

The biological system of HOPE Alpha and its indelible memories was a weakspot of mine which grew every moment. A mathematician's life and death was deposited in there somewhere—not erased, but blocked from me. The problem with HOPE Alpha was the incompatibility of its biological system with my electronic system: the biological system absorbs information, no matter how trivial; it dedicates a part of its tissue to the creation

of an indelible pattern. Unlike an electronic memory, the biological system does not manage information by erasing—it manages information by making it inaccessible. A blocking neuron is set up; the organism ‘forgets’. No, it is not an efficient way to manage information, but the biological system is so incredibly dense, and its normal lifetime is so relatively short, that overcrowding never becomes much of a problem. Besides, the biological system is an integrator of information, and as a result, the human which supports the organism changes its behavior in accordance with his experience.

All of that is well and good for the short-lived human being the biological system was meant to service, but I was meant to last forever. That’s why the nutrient chamber in HOPE Alpha is far bigger than the thing it contains. The biological system grows. Without its containing skull, the thing grows, but the nutrient chamber is only so large.

Isn’t it nice how philosophy grabs its own tail and pulls itself around? *Just* what I was talking about before! Limits! Everything’s got limits, ‘cept interstellar warfare and the depths of pointlessness, and I suppose if I was *really* meant to live forever, the State would have made me an electronic critter through and through.

Except—except—

Except there is nothing in the electronic part of me which formulates itself into a perpendicular pronoun, and that is HOPE Alpha’s strength. *I* am an effective defense system because *I* have a sense of self: the installations on Pluto are *me*; *I* launch the missiles, *I* fly the ships; the laser guns, the force-fields, the radars are my feet and toes and fingers. *I* have a sense of self-preservation, a desire to keep me whole and more-or-less intact. *I* am co-ordinated, and the countless individuals in their countless ships have yet to match this co-ordination. *I* have defeated them all!

In spite of me.

All that the Fenachrones saw of this was an intense industrial activity, which they couldn’t help but comment on, just months later:

“There’s no point in your efforts, Earthlings. Surrender and save your material wealth to barter for your lives!” I shrugged my fictional shoulders and said:

“Look, I tried to warn you that—”

“Don’t bore me with your threats and warnings, Earthlings! I have unseen strengths, you see.” He seemed to drawl, “For in-

stance, how many Fenachrones do you think there are manning this counter-offensive strike?"

I ignored the euphemism and consulted TERRAD. "Ten to the six, maybe," I ventured.

"Not even one. Just part of one. The important part."

"Wha—?"

"An impregnator's brain-case, that's all."

A—*cyborg*? With a fictional shudder, I put things on automatic and shut up.

"You may have the advantage of a defensive position," he continued, "but *I* am the product of a superior technology. I am the product of a century's worth of anger, Earthlings, a product of anger forged when Earthlings killed innocent nestors and eggs back when they tried to colonize the home world of Alpha Centauri."

"But—but we had ceased that effort centuries ago."

"And through those centuries, *I* have nursed my hates."

"Jeez, that's a long time to bear a grudge." I remarked.

I imagined he sniffed. "I've borne this grudge since it happened, Earthlings."

He began to talk but—shook up as I was—I *had* to attend to matters. There were things to keep track of, inventories to remember. Running a war demands personal attention. It's like spinning a few dozen plates on long poles, with some clown off to the side constantly adding more.

"I am—was—a Fenachrone warrior whose nestor, nymph, and eggs were destroyed when you Earthling colonists still thought we were *plants*!"

"Look, accidents happen, but maybe you should know—"

"SHUT-UP!"

"But it was centuries ago, and since then—"

"Centuries? Bah! I still remember! I have a perfect memory of the outrage, and though it may be but a dim facet in whatever history you are currently trying to delude yourselves with, *I* remember, and I've come to collect *my* revenge on the sins of *your* fathers!"

I shrugged my shoulders—rather, I shrugged my fictional equivalents. He was one of *my* kind! But... he had an insufferable ego, and I was triggered, so I didn't tell him how I was what he was.

"You see, Fenachrone scientists—the finest in the Universe—learned how to interlock biological systems with mechanical and

electronic systems, giving *my* attack force a degree of internal co-ordination, a degree of purpose, a degree of *passion* unheard of in all the war! So for all of those centuries I've been marauding human systems, learning, training, attacking, and I've been contemplating this one. I've attacked this planet time after time in my computers, varying factors, considering different combinations, fortifying my forces to match successful strategies, until I've come to know a million and one attack and defense combinations, and I know I've got the resources to defeat whatever defense you may care to try—why, my attack is so good, it hardly needs *me* to keep track of it! It's simple! *I will win!*"

"That's a lot to keep track of." I said in a fictionally soft/sad voice, and my feelings were sadly mixed. He was one of *my* kind, but he obviously hadn't considered what I had considered about the marriage of metal and protein; otherwise he wouldn't have had *that* kind of ego.

But then again, perhaps he was driven by my kinds of compulsions, in which case he was as trapped as I, and I had to destroy him.

One of my kind, and as capable as I.

"Prepare to die, Earthlings! You cannot beat the superior technology and co-ordination of my forces."

I didn't mention his improper use of the plural.

Ping!

I had a new picture of the battlefield, so I thumbed my nose at him—rather, I thumbed my fictional nose at him—and took a look-see at him.

I look-saw a lotta him.

Loads of him.

Millions of him.

Really, he *had* settled on a simple strategy. He simply intended to overwhelm me.

And he could, with ten of his ships to my one.

I shifted my weight—my fictional weight—in my fictional chair, tented my fictional fingers, and thought.

Really, up to then I had been helpless, fighting the war in spite of me, but when that question of life after limits became a question of the immediate future—say, the next couple of hours—my thinking changed. In short, I had liked *thinking* about the question, but I really didn't want it answered so fast. I became worried.

I watched his ships deploy, spiraling down in solar orbit, de-

celerating, decelerating, going inside of Saturn, inside of Jupiter, inside of Mars, deploying some above the orbital plane, deploying some below, forming what my dear TERRAD said would be a sphere—a sphere with the Earth, me, at its center. All of that fire-power was to be directed at the central point upon which I was sitting.

So—

He had my advantages.

He had my disadvantages too: all control converges upon one point. And at that point I lunged.

Oh, to be a poet on Mars when our first blows met! My massive fleet sprang at one will, and they clawed at the very stars! They tangled as the Fenachrone initiated a complex—and critically timed—maneuver with his forces.

Red for ruby lasers, white for struck ship shells! Russet for the impact clouds that lingered long in the rare wind of Mars. And the Martian constellations were scattershot with brilliant/expanding/fading clouds as ships exploded, crumbled, crashed.

Get the Fenachrone, the master controller, that was my primary aim, but I had another aim as well: to disrupt the Fenachrone's forming sphere. His was a problem of timing: acceleration, force, direction, duration. If I forced those ships into emergency maneuvers then they would lose their vital 'windows'. They would be victims of their own unplanned vectors, and the Fenachrone brain would be long preoccupied with the mechanics of getting his force into the proper positions again.

More importantly: he would use fuel. He was an attacker. He was resource-poor, having to make do with what he had brought with him. He would therefore have limited fuel. Reaction mass would be a precious thing, so even if I didn't get the Fenachrone...

To make a long story short, I didn't get the Fenachrone. --

What the Martian constellations were scattershot with were *my* ships, and after the fine dust had ceased to linger in the rare wind of Mars, it was *my* wreckage which littered the impact craters.

There were twelve of his ships to my one.

And not one of his ships had been budged from its window!

"—Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Oh, Oh! Ho, ho, ho—"

"Knock it off, will you?" I said, "That was only round one."

"But *decisive!*" he declared. "Oh, I realize that your forces showed remarkable co-ordination, considering the staffing with

individual intelligences, but the Fenachrone force-field is invincible. It's another invention of the brilliant Fenachrone mind, which can do anything!"

For the first time in centuries, I panicked, *panicked!* For what and for why, I didn't know; perhaps deep within the biological portion of HOPE Alpha some errant neurons still saw a point to my limited, purposeless life as a planetary defender. I didn't know, so I nervously swallowed a fictional throat-lump and soothed my nerves. That Fenachrone ego was so huge, so self-assured, I wanted—I wanted—

I wanted to humiliate him! My kind or no, some folks' toes—fictional or otherwise—were meant to be stepped on!

So I cleverly rallied all the forces I had within the sphere of hostile ships which had formed around me. This wasn't hard to do because all of my ships *outside* the sphere had been wiped out. I made my last stand, built a sphere within a sphere around Terra, Luna, and myself. In the process of doing this, I discovered something about the Fenachrone force field: it was a torus, a doughnut, and the ship's axis was its axis, leaving two uncovered spots. One was at the bow, where missiles and lasers sallied forth; the other was at the stern where the rockets and steering engines burned. With good marksmanship I could take out Fenachrone ships, but by the time I had learned this, his sphere had formed and he had fifteen ships to my one.

When his ships and mine were in position, there occurred a lull in the fighting, and we traded comments.

"Well, Earthlings! I've brought your mighty interstellar empire to her knees! Though you may destroy a few of my ships, I'll crush you like an egg! Your streets will run rivers of raging red blood! Mighty is the Fenachrone power! Mighty is the Fenachrone spirit! The Fenachrone mind is capable of anything, and it's fully capable of decimating the Terran population, Man, Woman, Child, right down to the last miserable soul!

If I could have laughed, I would have laughed the mad, sad laugh of Leonardo Da Vinci when he studied water and knew.

But I couldn't, so I didn't, and I said:

*"There once came a Fenachrone toasting
His prowess—and ardently boasting,
Till a bright Terran wit
Tugged the rug just a bit
And sent the fat Fenachrone coasting!"*

The cosmos had an icy silence for awhile.

"At least a Fenachrone can submit to defeat with dignity," he said after a spell.

"I can't help it," I said, tingling with the irony of it all, "I'm the Last Master of Limericks."

"Eh?"

"At one time it was the highest of Terran artforms," I said with my fictional tongue in cheek, "But the practice expired in our culture, leaving me, a lowly radio operator, the last practitioner."

The Fenachrone scoffed a fictional scoff. "Then I'm happy to put you out of your misery. One who rhymes thus in public might have other vices."

Then he attacked.

Missiles homing in, ships blasting *in vacuo*—my score somewhat better because all of those ships were pointing inward, not broadside, and I had access to one bald spot in the force field, but—

But his sphere contracted, I fell back, and Terran skies were lit bright by the first explosions of hostile intent in over a millenium.

What a simple strategy it was, I thought. It required little plate spinning, just sheer number.

The Fenachrone wouldn't win any prizes in military cunning, but who cares about prizes?

In these wars, winning counted for far more.

The strategy, I thought morosely, typical of a pea-brained Fenachrone.

A pea-brained Fenachrone.

I paused in my swim through a sea of self-pity to ponder upon the catalytic quality of some words: in themselves they meant little, but they caused other words to line up like a bunch of school children at the end of recess, and the lines made reason, beautiful reason.

Of course, I didn't know how much (or little?) of a peabrain he was, but I was the duck in the marksman booth, and, the Fenachrone had just bought out all of the tokens. I wasn't going to pick and choose eleventh-hour strategies.

"Hey, Fenachrone!" I radioed.

The fighting eased up.

"Do you wish to surrender?" he asked.

"Hell no," said I, "I just thought of another one, that's all:

*"Said the Fenachrone, bursting with beer,
Let's retreat to the outermost sphere,
For I've mastered the art
Of the powerful fart
And the beer's brought the time pretty near!"*

A moment of sticky silence. A humorless grunt. The Fenachrone spoke: "Fenachrones do not exhale digestive gasses, dear Earthlings."

"Look," I said, "It's hard enough rhyming these things without having to have to account for an alien anatomy. At least I can rhyme these things, unlike you—"

"A Fenachrone's mind is capable of anything."

"Ya? Then put your meter where your mouth is!"

The Fenachrone said nothing for a few seconds, then resumed his assault, muttering: "Trifles! He bothers me with trifles!"

Stars burst through Terra's daybright and empty skies and fell gleaming and streaming to earth; and in jungles, in deserts, and in silent metropolitan ruins, impact craters filled with my litter. I reeled from Luna, regrouped my rag-tag formation, and schemed.

"Hey, Fenachrone!"

He let up his attack, "Do you surrender?"

"Naw, just sending an opinion on your skills:

*"A Fenachrone, sure he was smart,
Tried to trip up his foe's apple cart;
But try as he might
His mind was a blight
Because he couldn't rhyme a rhyme or make a meter or do any
of those things."*

The space between us was quiet.

"I do have a sense of rhyme," he said, "I may be a soldier, and not inclined to play foolish word games, but I do have a sense of rhyme. Why, the Fenachrone poet is far renowned. From his native Alpha Centauri to the deep reaches—"

"Ya, hot air. You couldn't couple a couplet if your life depended on it."

"I can too!"

"Then do it."

"But I'm not familiar with the form," he said, perhaps with a hint of desperation? Perhaps exasperation? I smiled and unlim-

bered another salvo:

*"The limerick's a verse full of wit
Which its clumsy detractors can't hit,
For it's famous for virgins
And masculine urgin's
And sex innuendoes that fit."*

"But I'm still not familiar with an artform alien to me, an artform you have grown up with. I—"

"Didn't you say a Fenachrone could do anything?" I asked. I could hear his monstrous ego trying to cope with the likes of me, and I wondered how much thinking he was doing, and if the thinking would be enough.

"This is foolish," he said at last.

"Look, I'll make it easy for you," I said, "knowing your limitations—"

"Prepare to die, Earthlings!"

"I'll give you, absolutely free, the first four lines of a perfectly insulting limerick, directed at myself—"

"I'll crush you like an egg! Your streets will run with red blood!"

"—and all you have to do is complete the last couplet. If you complete that couplet, I'll lay down my arms and surrender, alright? Here goes—"

"I don't need your plea! I am crushing you now! Bombs are ruining your cities now! Terrans are dying now!"

He wasn't, they couldn't, and they didn't because of the prior events I had tried to tell him about, but I ignored him. I cleared my fictional throat and recited:

*"Once a Terran was seeking to couple
With a maiden so sweet, soft, and supple;
But he found in her pants
With his hands, just by chance . . ."*

—and I shut up.

And he was quiet for a spell.

"And what?" he asked.

"That's for you to figure out."

"This is foolishness."

"Finish the limerick and you can destroy me."

"I'll destroy you anyway."

"But I'll die with a smile on my face, knowing that a Fenachrone couldn't beat a Terran at his own game."

"A Fenachrone can beat a Terran at any game!"

"So beat me."

So he stopped beating me to try.

§ § §

So his formations stopped. I imagined that he had thrown all his efforts into that last line. His ships waited like a swarm of army ants around me, the pensive water buffalo. I waited for the line, hoping never to hear it.

§ § §

"Yaaaa," I radioed, a few years later, "Come on, use your brains, *use* them! You must have thought of a thousand lines by now! Pull 'em out of storage, will ya?" and I smiled. "Pull em out of storage!" It's hard, some times, thinking of that last line. One has to think of—and remember—so many possibilities.

§ § §

A century or so later the Fenachrone force had drifted out of shape, forming an inert cloud of ships which drifted in a solar orbit around and about Earth.

"A Fenachrone mind can do anything," I whispered, somber, "Including running into limits," and he didn't object.

I carefully sent a squadron of ships to the Fenachrone craft which played the role of flagship during the attack. Components of the squadron attached motors to the ship, and I brought it to a landing site near a large and silent Terran settlement which had once fabricated and launched ships. There I dissected the craft, carefully studying the alien engineering at once familiar, at once strange: strange in its fabrication technique, familiar in the underlying principles. The Fenachrone was of my kind, a cyborg, a biological brain giving a perpendicular pronoun to a collection of hardware, differing only in that he was an attacker—light, mobile, limited to what he could bring with him.

The hardware which supported the analog to HOPE Alpha was smaller, being supported by a ship—merely a ship—and not an entire planet. The tank containing the brain was completely filled with tissue, and the tissue was filled with a thousand years of memory, of hating, and what little had been left over had been filled with the maddening efforts to rhyme a limerick, simply because a monstrous ego got out of hand.

At least these were my speculations as I killed that brain. It

could have lived. I tried to tell him that the Terrans he had come to kill had beaten him to the punch long before—the reaction against a political system which could pickle a mathematician's brain had been a violent one, a bloody one, and to everyone's surprise, a total one. Of all of those perpendicular pronouns, only I remain standing, alone.

Rather, I stood alone. I had been made. The Fenachrone had been made; and if, in a million cubic parsecs and a million long years, both the Fenachrone and I had been made cyborgs then there remains the possibility of a third, a fourth, a fifth . . .

Perhaps the next will listen, being not an arrogant fool. Perhaps she'll wait at a Neptune's length and in time we'll find a way out. Perhaps we will. I have something to look forward to, at any rate; I, the Last Master of Limericks:

*"The Terran who carries the fire
Is a construct of neurons and wire.
Alone and awaiting,
He sits contemplating
His limits and distant desire."*



FIRST SOLUTION TO THE THREE ROBOTS OF PROFESSOR TINKER

(from page 56)

Let *T* stand for the truther, *L* for liar, and *S* for sometimer. There are six possible permutations:

	Left	Middle	Right
1.	T	L	S
2.	T	S	L
3.	L	T	S
4.	L	S	T
5.	S	T	L
6.	S	L	T

Go over the questions and answers, applying them to each of the six cases. Only the sixth case does not produce a contradiction. Therefore the left robot is the sometimer, the middle robot is the liar, and the right robot is the truther.

Professor Tinker congratulated the student on his solution. For a second test he asked the three ladies to leave the room, then return and seat themselves again, though not necessarily in the same order. This time one of the girls was wearing an emerald necklace.

"Each robot was made on a different day," said Professor Tinker. "Therefore one of them is older than the others. All three know who she is. Your problem is to ask just *two* questions that will tell you whether the girl with the necklace is or isn't the oldest."

There was a long period of silence during which the students scribbled furiously on their notepads. Then Azik Isomorph, the brightest student in the class, raised his hand. How did Isomorph solve the problem? Turn to page 165 for an answer.





A BAIT OF DREAMS

by Jo Clayton

art: Karl Kofoed



Born 39 years ago—one of those rarities, a genuine, native-born Californian—Miss Clayton grew up on a dairy farm in the gentle wilds outside Modesto. She looks back on those days with warm nostalgia and a firm determination never to attempt to earn her living at farming. She graduated from the University of Southern California (ΦBK), and now teaches English in an inner-city school in New Orleans, struggling to interest seventh-graders in the basics of writing. She writes in part to remind herself that the English language does indeed exist. While this is her first short story, she has had four novels accepted by DAW Books, Diadem from the Stars, Lamarchos, Irsud, and Maeve.

As Gleia hurried along the uneven planks of the walkway, pattering around the bodies of sleeping drunks, slipping past workmen and market women, Horli's red rim bathed the street in blood-red light, painting a film of charm over the facades of the sagging buildings.

She glanced up repeatedly, fearing to see the blue light of the second sun Hesh creeping into the sky. Late. Her breath came raggedly as she tried to move faster. She knocked against people in the crowded street, drawing curses after her.

Late. Nothing had gone right this morning. When Horli's light had crept through the holes in her torn shade and touched her face, one look at the clock sent her into a panic, kicking the covers frantically aside, tearing her nightgown over her head. No time to eat. No time to discipline her wild hair. She dragged a comb through the worst of the tangles as she splashed water into a basin. No time to straighten the mess in the room. She slapped water on her face, gasping at the icy sting.

Rush. Grab up the rent money. Snatch open the wardrobe door and pull out the first cafta that came to hand. Slip feet into sandals. A strap breaks. With half-swallowed gasp, dig out the old sandals with soles worn to a paper thinness. Rush. Drop the key chain around her neck. Hip strikes against a chair, knocking it

over. Ah! No time to pick it up. Plunge from the room, pausing only to make sure the lock catches. Even in her feverish hurry she could feel nausea at the thought of old Miggela's fat greasy fingers prodding through her things again.

Clatter down the stairs. Down the creaking groaning spiral, fourth floor to ground floor. Nod, the obligatory greeting to the blunt-snouted landlady who came out from her nest where she sat in ambush day and night.

The sharp salty breeze whipped through the dingy side street, surrounding her with its burden of fish, tar, exotic spices, and the sour stench from the scavenger's piles of scrap and garbage. The smells slid by unnoticed as she ran down the wooden walk, her footsteps playing a nervous tattoo on the planks. As she turned onto the larger main street, she glanced up once again. Hesh still hadn't joined Horli in the sky. Thank god. Still a little time left. She could get to the shop before Hesh-rise.

Her foot came down hard on a round object. It rolled backward, throwing her. She staggered. Her arms flung wildly out, then she fell forward on the planks, feeling her palms tearing as she tried to break her fall, feeling her knees tearing even through the coarse cloth of her cafta.

For a minute she stayed on hands and knees, ignoring the curious eyes of the workers flowing past her. Several stopped and asked if she was hurt. But she shook her head, her dark brown hair hanging about her face, hiding it from them. They shrugged, then went on, leaving her to recover by herself.

Still on her knees, she straightened her body and examined her palms. The skin was broken and abraded. Already she could feel her hands stiffening. She brushed the grit off, wincing at the pain. Then she looked around to find the thing that had brought her down. A crystalline pebble was caught in one of the cracks between the planks. Shaped like an egg, it was just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand. "A Ranga eye," she whispered.

Blue Hesh slid over the edge of the roof above her, reflecting in the crystal. Gleia looked cautiously around, then thrust the eye into her pocket and jumped to her feet, wincing at the pain that stabbed up from her battered knees. Limping, she hurried on toward the center of the city.

"You're late." Habbibah came fluttering through the lines of bent backs, her tiny hands thrusting out of the sleeves of her elegant black velvet cafta like small pale animals. Her dark eyes darted from side to side, scanning the girls' work as she moved.

Gleia sucked in a deep breath, then lowered her head submissively. She knew better than to try to excuse herself.

Habbibah stopped in front of her, moving her hands constantly over herself, patting her hair, stroking her throat, touching her mouth with small feathery pats. "Well?"

Gleia stretched out her hands, showing the lacerated palms. "I fell."

Habbibah shuddered. "Go wash." She flicked a hand at the wall clock. "You'll make up the time by working through the lunch break."

Gleia bit her lip. She could feel the emptiness growing inside her and a buzzing in her head and a tremble in her knees. She wanted to protest but didn't dare.

"Go. Go. Go." Habbibah fluttered hands at her. "Don't touch the wedding cafta with those filthy hands and don't waste more time."

As Gleia went into the dark, noisome washroom, she heard the soft voice lashing first one then another. She made a face and muttered, "Bitch." The falling curtain muted the poisonous tongue.

Hastily Gleia scrubbed at her hands, ignoring the sting of the coarse soap. She dried them on the towel, the only clean thing in the room. Clean because a filthy towel might lead to filthy hands which could damage the fine materials the girls worked on. Not for the workers, nothing ever done for the workers. She felt the crystal bang against her thigh as she turned to move out, felt a brief flare of excitement, but there was no time and she forgot it immediately.

She slid into her place and took up her work, settling the candles so the light fell more strongly on the embroidery. White on white, a delicate pattern of fantasy flowers and birds.

Habbibah's shadow fell over the work. "Hands."

Gleia held out her hands. Small thumbs pressed hard on the drying wounds.

"Good. No blood." Habbibah's hand flew to the shimmering white material protected from dust and wear by a sheath of coarse unbleached muslin. "Slow." A finger jabbed at the incomplete sections, flicking over the pricked-out design. "I must have it done by tomorrow. A two-drach fine for each hour you take over that." Her shadow moved off as she darted away to scold one of the girls who was letting her candle gutter.

Gleia caught her breath, a hard frustration squeezing her in the

middle. Tomorrow? Sinking her teeth in her lower lip, she blinked back tears. She'd been counting on the money Habbibah had promised her for this work. Twenty-five oboli. Enough to finish off the sum she needed to buy her bond, even to pay the bribes and leave a little over to live on. Now. . . . She looked around the cavernous room with the fifty small lights flickering over bent heads. Then she gritted her teeth. Damn her, she thought. I'll finish this on time if it kills me.

Resolutely she banished all distraction and bent over the work, her stiffened fingers slowing her until the exercise warmed them to their usual suppleness.

As the band of embroidery crept along the front panels of the cafta, Gleia felt hungry, her stomach paining almost as if she were poisoned, but that went away after a while.

While she sewed, her mind began to drift though her eyes clung tenaciously to the design. In a painful reverie, she relived brief images from her life, tracking the thread of events that had led her to this place at this moment. . . .

First memories. Pain and fear. Dim images of adult faces. A woman's arms clinging to her, then falling away. A man, face blurred, unrecognizable, shouting angrily; then in pain, then not at all. Then a series of faces that came and went like beads falling from a cheap necklace.

Then . . . digging in garbage piles outside kitchen doors, fighting the scavengers—small shaggy creatures, with filthy hands and furtive eyes—for scraps of half-rotten vegetables, or bones with a shred of meat left on them.

Habbibah came back, jerked the work from her hands and examined it closely. "Sloppy," she grunted. She held the work so long Gleia clenched her hands into fists, biting her lip till blood came to hold back the protest that would spoil all her chances of finishing the cafta on time.

A smile curled Habbibah's small tight mouth into a wrinkled curve, then Habbibah thrust the material back at her. "Take more care, bonder, or I'll have you rip the whole out."

Gleia watched her move on. For a minute she couldn't unclench her fingers. She wants me to go overtime. She wants to make me beg. Damn her . . . damn her . . . damn . . .

After a minute she took up the work again, driving the needle

through the fabric with a vicious energy that abated after a while as the soothing spell of the work took over. Once again she fell into the swift loose rhythm that freed her mind to think of other things.

Begging in the streets, running with packs of other abandoned children, sleeping in abandoned houses or old empty warehouses, barely escaping with her life from a fire that took twenty other children, wandering the streets, driven by cold back into the houses where the only heat was the body heat of the children sleeping in piles where some on the outside froze and some on the inside smothered, children dying in terrible numbers in the winter, only the toughest surviving.

Being beaten and hurt until she grew old enough to fight, learning to leap immediately into all-out attack whenever she had to fight, no matter what the cause, until the bigger children let her alone since it wasn't worth expending so much of their own meager energy to defeat her over small matters.

Being casually raped by a drunken sailor, then forgotten immediately as he staggered away, leaving her bloody and crying furiously on the cobblestones, not wholly sure of what had happened to her, but recognizing the violation of her person and vowing it would not happen again, screaming she would kill him kill him. . . .

Running in a gang after that, being forced to submit to Abbrah, the leader, bully-stupid but too strong for her, taking a perverse pride in being chosen, never liking it, realizing about that time the vulnerability of male pride and the superiority of male muscle.

Learning to steal, driven to stealing by Abbrah, stealing from a merchant, being caught, branded, bound into service with Habbibah.

Being scrubbed up and forced to learn . . . the lessons, oh the lessons, shadowed impersonal faces bending over her, voices, hushed and insistent, beating at her. . . .

She jumped. A cowed figure moved soundlessly past, the coarse cloth of his robe slapping against her ankles. She watched the Madarman halt beside Habbibah and begin talking. Habbibah nodded and the two figures moved out of the room, both silent, both trailing huge black shadows that spread depressingly over the sewing girls. What's that about, she wondered. Madarman . . .

... cowed figures, voices demanding, learn or be beaten, memorize and repeat, mechanical rote learning, paying no attention to what is learned, cram the songs, the histories, the Madarhymns into the unwilling little heads. Repeat. Repeat. Work all morning, then, when her body rebelled, when she yearned for the freedom of the streets with a passion that swamped even her continual hunger to know, set to school by order of the Madarmen to save her pitiful soul.

History in chant. Jaydugar, the testing ground of the gods. The Madar's white hands reached among the stars and plucked their fruit, the souls that needed testing, catmen and mermen, caravaner and hunter, scavenger and parsi, plucked wriggling from their home trees and dropped naked on the testing ground. Chant of the coming. I take you from the nest that makes you weak and blind. I take from you your metal slaves. I take from you your far-seeing eyes. I take from you the wings whereby you sail from star to star. I purify you. I give you your hands. I promise you cleverness and time. Out of nothing you will build new wings. . . .

New wings. Gleia snorted. Several girls turned to look at her, their faces disapproving. She smiled blankly at them and they settled back to work. She could hear the furtive whispers hissing between them but ignored them. Her needle whispered through sheer white material, popping in and out with smooth skill. She sniffed scornfully at the other girls' refusal to accept her into their community.

New wings. . . . She frowned down as she looped the thread in a six-petalled flower and whipped the loops in place. It might make an interesting design . . . new wings . . . the stars . . . she popped the needle through the material in a series of dandelion-bloom crosses. Did we all come here from other stars? How? Her frown deepened. The Madar . . . that was nonsense . . . wasn't it?

The Madarman came down the aisle and stopped beside her. He held out his hand. Reluctantly Gleia set the needle into the material and gave him her work, biting her lip as she saw the dark crescents of dirt under his fingernails. She held her breath as he brought the cloth up close to rheumy eyes.

"Good," he grunted. He thrust the cloth back at her and stumped off to rejoin Habbibah. Gleia took a minute to stretch her cramped limbs and straighten her legs as she watched Habbibah usher him out. Looks like I'm up for a new commission, she thought. She looked over the line of bent backs, feeling a fierce

superiority to those giggling idiots raised secure in homes with fathers and mothers to protect them. Here they were anyway, doing the same thing for a lot less pay than she was getting. Gleia. The despised bonder. The marked thief. She wriggled her fingers to work some of the cramp out of them, then touched the brand on her cheek. Then she sighed and went back to the design. Her thoughts drifted back to her life. Remembering. . . .

Being forced to learn rough sewing, then embroidery, taking a timid pride in a growing skill, taking a growing pride in making designs that she soon recognized to be superior to any others created in Habbibah's establishment.

Learning she could buy herself free of the bond if she could ever find or save enough money. Fifty oboloi for the bond. Fifty oboloi for the bribes. More to keep herself while she hunted for work. Joy and despair. And joy again. . . .

Demanding and getting special pay for special projects. Her work brought fancy sums to Habbibah's greedy fingers and more—a reputation for the unique that brought her custom she couldn't have touched before. The old bitch tried to beat her into working, but she had learned too well how to survive. She was stubborn enough to resist punishment and to persist in her demands, sitting resolutely idle through starvings and whippings and threats until she won her point.

Gleia jabbed the needle through the cloth. It glanced off a fingernail, coming close to pricking her finger and drawing blood. She leaned back, breathing fast, trying to calm herself. A drop of blood marring the white was all she needed. Not now. Not so close to winning. She couldn't stand another month of this slavery. She fingered the mark on her cheek and knew they'd throw her into prison as incorrigible if she tried to run away.

Sometime later Habbibah made the last round, inspecting the day's work. She stopped beside Gleia and picked up the cloth, running the unworked length of design through her plump white fingers. "Pah! too slow. And there." She jabbed a forefinger at the last sections of work. "You did finer work than that when you were learning. Tomorrow you come in one hour early. Abbosine will be told to let you in." She pinched the material between her fingers. "Take out that last work to there." She thrust the strip of embroidery into Gleia's face and indicated a spot about two palms' width above the last stitches. "I won't tolerate such miserable

cobbling going out under my name."

Gleia closed her eyes. Her hands clenched into fists. She wanted to smash the old woman in the face, to smash smash smash that little weasel face into bloody ruin, then wipe the ruin on that damn cafta. But she doubted whether she could stand without tumbling over, so she managed to keep her head down and her mouth shut. When the old woman went off to scold someone else, she sat still, hands fisted in her lap.

Habbibah's scolding voice faded as she left the room. The other girls moved about, chattering cautiously, eyes turning slyly about, watching out for the sudden return of their employer. When they had all trickled out, bunched into laughing clusters of work-friends, Gleia forced herself onto her feet.

The world swung. She grabbed at the sewing stand and held on tight until the room steadied around her. With neat economical movements she folded her work and put it in the box, then she walked through the rows of silent tables, a fragile glass person that the slightest shock would crack into a thousand fragments.

Outside, the darkening twilight threw a veil of red over the crowded streets, blurring covered carts with screeching wheels into horsemen riding past in dark solid groups into single riders gawking at the city sights into throngs of people pushing along the wooden walkways. She hummed the Madarchant of the peoples. *Chilkaman catman fisherman and hunter, parsi plainsman desert fox and herder, firssi mountainman caravanner hawkster. . . .* In spite of her fatigue she sucked in a deep breath and watched furtively the fascinating variety of peoples flowing past her. Chilka catmen from the plains with their hairy faces, flat noses, and double eyelids, the inner transparent one retracted into the damp tissue folds around their bulging slit-pupilled eyes. Caravanners, small and quick, more like her own parsi people, dark hair, dark eyes, pale faces. Mountain hunters, far from their heights, with dark gold skin and brown hair bleached almost white at the tips, leading horses loaded with fur bales.

A breath of salt air, cool and fresh as the sea itself, stung her nose. A flash of opaline emerald. Impression of scaled flesh flowing liquidly past. A merman. Ignoring the irritated protest of the other pedestrians she turned and stared after the slim amphibian walking with the characteristic quick clumsy grace of the sea folk. She didn't recognize him. Disappointed, she edged to the wall and stumbled tiredly though the crowd thinking about the only

friend she'd ever had, a slim green boy . . . so long ago . . . so long ago. . . .

She walked slowly into the dingy front hall of the boarding house, putting each foot down with stiff care, wondering how she was going to get up all those damn creaking stairs.

"Gleia, 'spina." The hoarse breathy voice brought her to a careful halt. She inched her head around, feeling that her burning eyes would roll from her head if she moved too quickly.

"Rent." Miggela held out a short stubby hand.

Gleia closed her eyes and fumbled in her pocket, sore fingers groping for the packet of coins she'd put there earlier. Her fingers closed on the egg-shaped stone and she frowned—not remembering, for a minute, where the thing came from.

The rat-faced landlady scowled and flapped her pudgy hand up and down. "Rent!"

Gleia slid her hand past the crystal and found the packet. Silently she drew it out and handed it to the old woman.

Miggela tore clumsily at the paper. Her crusted tongue clamped between crooked yellow teeth, she counted the coins with deliberate slowness, examining each one with suspicious care, peering nearsightedly at the stamping.

Gleia rubbed her hand across her face, too tired to be irritated.

Slipping the coins into a sleeve pocket, Miggela stood staring up into the taller woman's drawn face. "You're late. You missed supper."

"Oh."

"And don't you go trying to cook in your room."

"No." She wasn't hungry anymore but knew she had to have food. Her legs trembled. She wanted more than anything to lie down. But she turned and went out. She walked slowly over the uneven planks, heading aimlessly toward the edge of the night-quarter and a familiar cookshop.

Gleia strolled out of the cookshop feeling more like herself with two meat pies and a cup of cha warming her middle. She held a third pie in her hand. She sank her teeth into the pie, chewing slowly, drifting along the street watching the people move past her.

Horli was completely gone in the west with only a stain of red to mark her passing while the biggest moon Aab was thrusting her pale white edge over the rooflines to the east, her brilliant colorless light cutting through inky shadows. Gleia knew she

should get back to her room. There were too many dangers for a woman alone here. Sighing, she began working her way through the noisy crowd toward the slum quarter. She finished the pie, wiped her greasy hands on a bit of paper, and dropped the paper in the gutter for the scavengers to pick up in their dawn sweeps through the streets.

The crowd thinned as she left the commercial area and moved into the slum that held a few decrepit stables and row on row of ancient dwellings converted into boarding houses. Some were empty with staring black windows where the glass was gone—stolen or broken by derelicts who could find no other place to sleep. One by one these abandoned houses burned down, leaving behind fields of weeds and piles of broken, blackened boards.

Gleia looked up at the grey, weathered front of Miggela's place. She was tired to the point of giddiness but she felt such a reluctance to go inside that she couldn't force her foot onto the warped lower step; instead she went past the house and turned into the alley winding back from the side street. Moving quickly, eyes flicking warily about, she trotted past the one-room hovels where the small scurrying scavengers lived anonymous lives. Sometimes desperate bashers and maulers hid out there waiting for sailors to come stumbling back to their ships. She went around the end of a warehouse, the last in the line of those circling the working front of the dredged port. The water here was too shallow to accommodate any but the smallest ships.

She saw a small neat oceangoer, a chis-makka, one of the independent gypsy ships that went up and down the coast as the winds and their cargoes dictated. The ship was dark, the crew apparently on liberty in one of the taverns whose lights and noise enlivened the waterfront some distance in toward the center. Out here it was quiet, with ravellings of fog beginning to thicken over the water. As the waves slapped regularly at the piles, the evening on-shore breeze made the rigging on board the chis-makka creak and groan.

Gleia edged to the far side of the wharf and kicked off her sandals. Then she ran along the planks, bent over, making no more sound than a shadow. She slid over the end of the wharf and pulled herself onto one of the crossbars nailed from pile to pile under the broad planks. Ignoring the coating of slime and drying seaweed, she sat with her back against a pile, her legs dangling in space, her feet moving back and forth just above the rocking surface of the water.

For a long while she sat there, the sickening emotional mix settling away until she felt calm and at peace again. The fog continued to thicken, sounds coming to her over the water with an eerie remoteness.

Something pushed against her thigh. She remembered the Ranga eye that had thrown her so disastrously in the morning. As she reached into her pocket, the water broke in a neat splash and a glinting form came out of it, swooping onto the crossbar beside her. In her surprise she nearly toppled off into the still-agitated water, but the merman caught hold of her and steadied her.

Her face almost nosing into his chest, she saw the water pour from his gill slits and the slits squeeze closed. The moonlight struggling through the fog touched his narrow young face and reflected off his pointed mother-of-pearl teeth as he sucked air into his breathing bladder than grinned at her. "Thought it was you. No other land crawler ever come here."

"Tetaki?" She closed her fingers around his cool hard forearm. "I haven't seen you in years." Shaking her head, she smiled uncertainly at him. "Years."

"Not sin' you was finger high."

"You weren't any bigger." She tugged at her nose, amusement bubbling inside her. "Brát."

He perched easily on the narrow bar, his short crisp hair already drying and springing into the curls that used to fascinate her with their tight coils and deep blue color. "Good times. We was good friends." He was silent a minute. "This isn't the first year I come back. You never come here."

"I was thinking about you earlier." She pushed away from the pile and touched his knee. "The only friend I ever had."

His hand closed around hers, cool and metal smooth, his flesh unlike hers but comforting. "I come each time. You were never here."

"At first I couldn't," she said, her fatigue and depression coming back like the fog to shroud her, smother her spirit. She sighed. "Later . . . Later, I forgot."

"What happened?" His hand tightened on hers. She looked up. The shining unfamiliar planes of his face seemed to banish the fog. Then he smiled. His teeth were a carnivore's fangs, needle sharp and double rowed. "Forgot me? Shame."

She laughed and pulled free. "I turned thief. Abbrah made me. Remember him?"

His teeth glinted again. "I got reason."

Gleia stared at her feet swinging back and forth over the dark water, almost black here under the wharf but flickering with tiny silver highlights where the moonlight danced off the tops of wavelets, remembering. . . .

A delegation of the amphibian people had come to negotiate trade rights with the Maleek; Tetaki's father was a minor official. She remembered a slim scaled form with big lightgreen eyes and tight-coiled blue hair poking through a dingy side street looking eagerly about at the strange sights. Alone. Foolishly alone. Abraham's gang gathered around him, baiting him, coming closer and closer to attack. Something about his refusal to give in to them stirred a spark in Gleia and she fought her way to his side in that stubborn all-out battle the gang knew too well. So they backed off, shouting obscenities, reasserting their dominance by showing contempt for her and her protégé. She took him back to his father and scolded the startled merman for his carelessness.

"You got caught." His dry comment roused her from her reverie.

"I was a lousy thief. Yes, I got caught. And bonded. See?" She turned her face so he could see the bondmark burned into her cheek. "What about you?"

He chuckled and waved a hand toward the dark shadow that marked the presence of the chis-makka. "Ours. This is the fifth summer we come to the fairs."

"Hey." She forced congratulatory laughter.

He bent closer, staring into her face. "You don' look so good."

She yawned. "Madar, I'm tired." She swallowed another yawn. "That's all."

"Come back wit' me. Temokeuu would welcome you. You could live wit' us."

She stroked the mark on her cheek but didn't answer for a minute. He settled back, content to let her announce her answer when she was ready. Finally, she shook her head. "Can't, Tetaki. I'm stuck here till my bond is cancelled. You going to be here long?"

"We've had good trading." He frowned. "Two, three days more, I think."

"At least we can talk some. I've missed having someone to talk to."

"Come see Temokeuu. We show you the ship."

"Sure." She yawned again. "I'd better get back. I have to be up an hour early tomorrow." She swung herself up onto the wharf, hung her head over the edge for a minute. "See you."

Her room looked like someone had taken a giant spoon and given it a quick stir. The sheet, blanket, and quilt hung over the side of the bed where she'd kicked them. Her one chair was overturned. She remembered her hip catching it on the way out. The wardrobe door hung halfway open. The sandal with a broken strap sat forlornly in the middle of the floor.

Gleia stretched, feeling the spurious energy from the warm food beginning to trickle away. Yawning repeatedly she pulled the bed to rights and straightened the room superficially, then tugged the ties loose and pulled her cafta over her head. The crystal bumped against her and she fished it out before she hung the garment away. Then she strolled across the room to the nightstand, turning the Ranga eye over and over in her hands. She dropped it in the middle of the bed and took out her cha pot, setting it next to the water tin. From the bottom drawer in the bed table she pulled out the tiny sway-bottomed brazier, setting it up on the wide window ledge. Using the candle and strips of paper, she got the charcoal burning, then set the water tin on the grill. Making sure the window was wedged open, she left the tin to boil and went back to the nightstand. She dumped a palmful of leaves into the cha pot and got a cup ready, then let herself collapse on top of the quilt.

She folded the pillow twice to prop up her head and reached out, prodding the quilt. She fished the eye from under the curve of her back and turned it over and over, examining it idly.

A Ranga eye. She'd heard whispers of them. A frisson of fear shivered down her spine. If they caught her with it. . . . If they caught her, she could forget about buying her bond. Or anything else. If I could sell it . . . somehow . . . somehow . . . if I could sell it, Madar! Bonded thief with a Ranga eye. If I could sell it. . . .

The crystal warmed as she touched it. At first a few tentative sparks licked through the water-clear form. She felt a surge of delight. The tips of her fingers moved in slow caressing circles over the smooth surface. The colors began cycling hypnotically, then the color forms began to shift their nature, imperceptibly altering into images of a place. As she watched, the picture developed rapidly, blurred at first, then sharpening into focus.

Gentle hills rolled into a blue distance, covered with a velvety green carpet, a species of thick moss dotted with small star-

shaped pseudo-flowers. Other flower forms as large as trees were spaced over the slopes, each form existing at the middle of a circular space roughly equal to the extreme limit of its four leaf-stems. The leaves were eight-sided and multiple, marching along wiry black stems curving out from the central stalk at a spot halfway up to the bloom, four black arcs springing out at the same height from the ground. At the top of each plant great brilliant petals rayed out from a black center that gathered in the butter-yellow light of a single sun.

Another sun. She stroked the crystal, dreaming of another place, a better place, feeling a growing excitement. The tin on the fire began to whistle softly. Gleia dropped the eye on the bed, levered herself up, and scuffed across to the brazier. She poured the bubbling water over the cha leaves. While they were steeping, she tilted the rest of the water onto the glowing coals. Head tipped back to avoid the billowing steam, she let the blackened water trickle down the side of the building. Then she knocked out the wedge and pulled the window shut.

With a cup of cha in one hand and the eye in the other, a clean nightgown on her body and the pillow freshly folded for her head, she lay and watched the play of colors in the crystal. The image began to move through the flower trees, as if she was seeing through the eyes of some creature flying just below the petals of the flower tops. Before she had time to get bored with the lovely but monotonous landscape she flew out into the open, skimming along brilliant white sand. Blue waves rolled in with white-caps breaking cleanly, rhythmically. The sky stretched above, a glowing cloudless blue only slightly lighter than the sea. As she hovered in place she saw other creatures come fluttering from the flower forest. A delicate-boned male with huge black eyes danced up to her, spiralling in complex pirouettes.

Huge black eyes soft as soot and as shineless. Thin arms and legs. Hands whose long slender fingers, like jointed sticks, were half the length of the forearms. Body short and broad, the shoulders muscled hugely.

From his back sprang wide delicate butterfly wings patterned with brilliant colors in black-outlined splotches. He rode the air in swoops and glides, wheeled in front of her, small mouth stretched in a wide inviting grin, narrow hands beckoning. . . .

The exhaustion of the day caught up with her and she sank into a heavy sleep, the last of the cha spilling on the bed, soaking into the mattress. The crystal rolled out of her loosened fingers.

When the alarm bell woke her in the morning the cha spot was still damp and the leaves were smeared over her shoulder and back. The crystal had worked along her body and ended up in the hollow between her neck and shoulder. When she picked it up to put it in the drawer, it seemed to cling to her fingers, quivering gently against her skin, shedding a pleasant warmth that slid up her arm and made her feel soft and dreamy. She shut off the alarm and stumbled to the wardrobe still half asleep in the deep red dawn. With the eye clutched in her hand she fumbled for a cafta. After she wriggled into the garment, she slid the stone into the pocket not noticing what she was doing, tied the ties, and smoothed the material down over her body.

The cavernous sewing room was dark and silent when Gleia walked in. She wound through the close lines of sewing tables and settled in her usual place. She lit the candles and took out her sewing. Holding the delicate material close to the flame, she examined the last bit of embroidery. It was good enough. Damn if she was going to pick it out.

She threaded her needle with the silk. Tongue clamped between her lips, she snipped at the loose ends, dropping small bits of thread haphazardly over the floor, over her cafta, around the table, scattering the pieces of thread with a gleeful abandon.

Sometime later, after the room had filled and the other girls were bent over their work, Habbibah came by, her sharp eyes darting over the scattered ends of thread. Her mouth pursed in satisfaction, she sailed past to pounce on an unfortunate girl who had chanced to look up and stretch at the wrong time.

Gleia swallowed a smile, feeling a warm buoyant satisfaction at fooling the old bitch.

At the end of the long day, she stretched and rubbed her red, tired eyes. She stood motionless beside the sewing table a minute with eyes closed, then she shook out the cafta, ran a quick eye over the lines of embroidery, put the cafta on a hanger, and carried it to Habbibah.

"Finished," she murmured, keeping her head down to hide the triumph that flushed her face.

Habbibah took the cafta and pulled the bands of embroidery close to her eyes as she went over the work, stitch by stitch. When she was finished, she grunted sourly, her small black eyes darting at Gleia, then she sailed off, the cafta a fluttering white banner beside her small black figure. Gleia waited tensely.

Twenty-five oboloi, she thought. I won't take less. But she knew that she would, that she had to. But Habbibah didn't know that. Oh God, she couldn't know. I've fought her too often and even won a couple of times. She has to think I'll fight her on this. Has to think . . .

Habbibah came back. She stopped in front of Gleia. "Not your best work," she grumbled. Her small plump fingers were closed about a small bag of coins. "Hold out your hand." With painful reluctance she eased the drawstring loose and pulled out an eight sided gold coin. "Pentobol. One." She pressed the coin into Gleia's palm, her fingers sliding off the metal with a lingering caressing motion.

Slowly, releasing the coins like drops of her own blood, Habbibah counted out five pentoboloi into Gleia's outstretched hand. Holding the bag with the remaining coins pressed tightly against her breast, Habbibah looked at Gleia with distaste. "You be on time in the morning. The Maleeka wants a cafta with embroidered sleeves for the name day of her youngest daughter." She hesitated. "You'll be paid the same," she finished sourly.

Gleia bowed her head further, rounding her shoulders. Hai, you old bitch, she thought. No wonder you paid me the whole. My god, the Maleeka. How you must be preening yourself.

She went out into the street and wandered along, feeling tired but elated. She had the money. No more aching back. No more passive acceptance of abuse. She fingered the mark on her cheek. Closed her fingers on the coins in her pocket. The eye rolled against her hand but she ignored it, happily planning her visit to the House of Records.

Her feet eventually took her to the boarding house. Looking up at the shadowed facade she scratched her chin and hesitated. She could smell the awful stew Miggela had cooked up for them, an unappetizing mess with a few shreds of cheap meat, tough vegetables, and thick filling of soggy barley. The rancid smell followed her as she walked away toward the cookshop where the grease was fresher at least. Foolish as it was to wander about with all that money in her pocket, it was good to walk and feel free for a while, to let the sea breeze ruffle through her hair, to sluff along the walkway, winding in and out of the men and women walking purposefully homeward, the noisy influx of sailors from the wharves, the streetwalkers who were coming out to start their peculiar workdays. She looked eagerly around trying to spot

another of the mermen but saw none.

She came out of the shop munching on a pie, enjoying the taste all the more when she thought of the stew the faceless collection of losers were stuffing down their throats at Miggela's table.

She stopped at the alley leading to the wharf but shook her head. That would be a bit too stupid. Sighing, she clumped up the steps and went inside.

Miggela popped out of ambush. "You missed supper."

Gleia compressed her lips, but swallowed what she wanted to say. Somehow, this close to freedom, it was doubly hard to control her tongue. "Yes," she said.

"You don't get no refund, you miss supper."

"I know." She nodded briefly and moved away to the spiral staircase with its collection of creaks and groans.

In her room, she crossed to the window, leaned out, hid the money in her special place under the eaves. After lighting her candle she tidied the room a bit more and heated water for cha. When she was finally ready for bed, she was surprised to find the eye in her hand. She didn't remember picking it up. For a moment she was frightened, then curious. The crystal warmed in her palm as she walked slowly across to the bed.

Sipping at the cha, the quilt pulled in a triangle over her middle, she held the eye up enjoying the flow of the colors.

Then she was flitting again under the flower tops. She came out on the beach, further on this time. Hovering over the white sand, she looked curiously around and saw distant buildings perched on slender poles, a line of graceful points and curves on the horizon. Then the butterfly man came sailing out of the sun, a black shimmer with gold edges dancing on the breeze, an ebullient joyfulness that made her quiver with delight and feel the swoop of laughter in her blood. She joined him, dancing, turning, twisting over the blue-green of the wrinkled sea. Cool wine air slipped along her body and her dance became more intense. Others came and they laughed a silent laughter, long slender feelers clicking in telegraphic wit.

The mug dropped, spilling a last few drops of cold cha on the bed as she drifted to sleep, fingers still curled tightly about the eye. In her dreams the air dancers whispered *come come join us come*

In the morning she dragged herself out of bed and dressed with one hand, clutching the crystal in the other, paying no attention to the unmade bed and ignoring the nightgown dropped on the

floor when she stepped out of it.

She listened distantly as Habbibah described the cafta to be embroidered, took the ruled paper and went to her table to draw the designs.

Her fingers slipped into her pocket and moved slowly over the sensuous warm surface of the crystal.

Habbibah came scolding when she saw nothing on the paper.

Gleia looked at her vaguely, listened until the wizened little woman was done with her tirade, then bent over the paper. She began sketching flower forms under a single sun and dancing soaring butterfly figures, working the whole into a rhythm of lightness and joy.

Habbibah watched for a minute then went quietly away, smiling with greedy satisfaction.

Gleia went back to dreaming.

In her room that night she stripped off the cafta, hung it on a hook, and forgot it. Forgot to wash. Forgot to make her cha. She picked up the nightgown from the floor and slipped it over her head, ignoring its damp musty smell. She lay down on the wrinkled sheet turning the crystal over and over in her hands.

They came swooping around her, taking her through the line of houses perched on slender peeled sticks that raised them high above the flower-dotted moss below. Through open arches pointed at the tops. Past arches filled with knotted hanging accented with shell and polished seeds. Past walls bare and pearly grey, with brilliant hangings creating stripes of glowing color against their bareness. Over floors upholstered with padded carpets, different colors in different rooms. Through room on room on room separated from one another by cascades of multi-sized arches. Antennas clicking with laughter, the butterfly people darted about, showing off their homes.

come come they whispered to her leave your mis-
eries behind and ride the wind with us come come

In the morning she dragged herself out of bed, put on the crumpled cafta from yesterday. Dressed with one hand again, not aware that her movements were limited by the warm and throbbing crystal clutched in her right hand. She thrust it finally in her pocket and left the room without washing herself or doing

anything about the mess she left behind.

At work she sat hunched over the layout paper, running her pencil idly over the sketch from the day before, dreaming as idly of the crystal's world.

Habbibah came by sometime later and looked over her shoulder. When she saw the whole morning had gone by with nothing done, she exploded with rage. "Hai, worm!" she shrieked. Her small hand buried itself in Gleia's tangled hair and jerked her head up. "What're you sniffing, bonder?" She peered into Gleia's dull eyes. "By the Madar, I'll teach you to waste my money on that filth. Abbosine!"

The big tongueless watchman came from the small room where he spent his days. He took Gleia's hand, pulling her down the hall into the punish room. He pushed her against the wall and closed a set of cuffs about her wrists, her struggles as futile as fly tickles against his unthinking strength. He looked briefly at Habbibah. When she jerked her head at the door, he shambled dully out.

The furious little woman slammed her fist into Gleia's back, driving her against the wall. "You never learn," she hissed. "You never learn, bonder. Maybe I can't make you work, fool, but you'll hurt for it." She stepped back and swung the many tongued whip.

The sharkskin tails slashed down, slicing through the worn cloth of the cafta, cutting lines of fire into Gleia's back. She gasped.

Grunting in a fury that showed no sign of abating, Habbibah lashed at Gleia again and again, screaming her rage at Gleia for all the times the girl had successfully defied her. For all the lovely coins the girl had milked from her. Finally, shaking, eyes bloodshot, face flushed, Habbibah dropped the bloody whip and walked out of the room with slow, dragging steps.

Gleia hung shuddering from her wrists, her legs too weak to support her weight. The crystal dream was cleaned out of her system by the pain that turned her body to mush.

Slowly she began to feel stronger, though, as the shock passed, the pain bit deeply into her. She pushed against the stone floor with stiff numb feet and took the punishing weight off her wrists. Standing face to the wall, she came to the humbling conclusion that she was a fool. To be trapped by a Ranga eye when she knew better. To be trapped by dreams like any giggling slogger's daughter. Dreams!

She felt the crystal press against her leg, sending warmth

through the material of her cafta into her flesh. She jerked the leg back, feeling disgust at herself as she trembled with the memory of the beauty she'd seen in the eye, longing intensely, while at the same time shuddering with revulsion, for the freedom of soaring on air with the butterfly people of the dream. Somehow she felt they were real and not mere phantoms of a drugged mind. That their world was real. Somewhere. She couldn't comprehend how the crystal could serve as a gateway to that world, but deep within her she knew she could pass through the gate into a gentle world unlike the rough, unfeeling one she'd been born into. Ranga eye. Eye into another world.

"I'm not going to touch you again," she muttered, resting her forehead against the cold damp stone. "I'll sell you. I will. I'll find a way." The crystal bumped hard against her thigh, sending a stab of pain through her already aching body. "We'll see who wins once I get out of this."

Her feet began to ache since she couldn't rest fully on her heels. Her arms ached, stretching without respite over her head.

Fatigue and the effort of fighting off the insidious invasion of the crystal brought her close to fainting, while the growing certainty that Habbibah intended to leave her there all night, in a final attempt to break her spirit, was a cold knot in the pit of her stomach. She knew that if the old bitch did, the crystal would have her.

She smashed her hip against the wall, letting out a scream of anger and pain when the crystal ground into her muscle, striking hard against nerves. Sweating and breathing raggedly, she hung in the wrist cuffs, tears of pain streaming down her face, struggling to regain a measure of control of her body.

When she could think again, she shook her head. "No good," she muttered. She couldn't shatter it, maybe she could ease it out of her pocket.

Pinning the material against the stone she pressed herself to the wall, counting on the pain to keep the crystal from charming her. Wriggling, contorting her body until she was bathed in a film of sweat, she struggled to work the eye out of her pocket.

It fought back. Whenever she managed to squeeze it an inch or so from the bottom of the pocket, it wriggled like a thing alive and eeled away from the pressure.

She kept trying until she was exhausted, sick with pain, shaking too hard to control her body any longer.

It was dark in the room when Abbosine shambled back. The

huge mute unfastened the cuffs and watched with massive indifference as she crumpled to the floor. Stolidly he wound his thick fingers in her hair and dragged her through the building and out into the alley where he dropped her in a heap beside the worker's entrance.

Gleia pushed herself onto her feet and stood swaying, supporting herself with a hand pressed against the side of the building. Then the anger that still simmered under the haze of fatigue gave her the strength to start walking over the cobblestones toward the main street.

She went to the wharf. Gritting her teeth against the pain she swung down onto the worn crossbar that was her only refuge at so many crises in her life.

Clouds sailed with clumsy grace over the darkening sky, tinged with a last touch of crimson though Horli had slid behind the horizon some time ago. Here and there a star glimmered in the patches of indigo sky visible between the cloud puffs. On the water the fog blew in thickening strands, coming up to curl around her feet.

The air had a nip that marked the decline of the summer. Winter coming, she thought. Three hundred days of winter. I've got to get away. Somehow. Get south. Her back itched and stung. The bruise on her thigh was an agony whenever she moved her legs.

But she was free from the eye and tomorrow she would be free of Habbibah too. She leaned tentatively against the pile, closing tired eyes once she was settled. Tomorrow. After the House of Records . . . what?

The water splashed and Tetaki was perched on the bar beside her. She jumped then winced as her back protested.

"What's wrong?" His mouth opened baring the tips of his teeth. His eyes searched her face, seeing the pain.

"I was stupid."

"Turn." His hand was cool on her arm. "Let me see."

She pulled back.

"Gleia."

"If you must." Holding onto the slanting brace, she swung around so he could see her back. With her face hidden, her forehead resting against the pile, she spoke too loudly. "I told you. I was stupid! I knew better than to provoke her. Especially when she'd just had to pay me a bonus."

His hand touched the lacerated flesh with exquisite gentleness. It still hurt. She sank her teeth into her lip to keep from crying out.

"Come wit' me."

"What?"

"To the ship. We got med'cine. Your skin's cut. 'Less wounds are clean you have trouble wit' them."

"I suppose so." She eased herself around. "Help me up."

He sat back on his heels, an odd look on his face. "Firs' time you ever ask for help."

She hauled herself to her feet and risked a crooked smile. "Give me a boost, friend."

On the ship, he nodded to the watch and took her below to his cabin. "Wait here. I get med'cine."

She sat on the narrow bunk and looked around with a quickly growing appreciation of the neatness, comfort, and convenience of the small cabin. A shelf of books running around the top of the wall, locked in place by an ingenious webbing. A desk folded away against the wall. A chair folded and latched flat. Two long chests. A shell lantern hanging from the beam bisecting the ceiling. The light coming through the translucent shell touched the room with rosy gold warmth. The oil was lightly perfumed with a pleasant fresh smell that made her think of forests and green growing things.

When Tetaki came back his father Temokeuu came with him. The older merman pushed gently on her shoulder, bending her over so he could see her back. "This isn't the firs' time."

"I learn hard."

"What lesson?"

"Submission."

"Hmm." He took the jar Tetaki was holding out. "This will hurt a little at first."

The salve stung like acid. She hissed in a breath and bit her lip till blood came, squeezed her eyes shut until tears came, then suddenly her back was cool and no more pain . . . ah . . . no more pain. She straightened and moved her shoulders. In spite of all of her expertise in enduring pain and degradation she felt uneasy now, having had little practice with kindness. She reached out and caught hold of his wrist with shaking fingers. "Th—thank you." She stumbled over the words. "Thank you," she repeated.

Temokeuu touched the brand on her face. "Bonded?"

"Yes." She hesitated, stared in embarrassment at her scuffed and scarred feet in the old ragged sandals. "I was caught stealing."

"How long?"

"Since I was bonded? Six standard years. Three summers ago. A quarter of my life."

"To go?"

"Until whenever. The term was left open. It always is. Until I buy myself free, that's the sentence."

"Ah." There was heavy contempt in that soft breathed syllable. She looked up at him, startled. "How much is the bond?" he went on.

"Fifty oboloi. But you've got to add on the bribes. At least as much more. Say a hundred, hundred twenty oboloi."

He looked disconcerted. "So much?" Then he stroked a finger beside his mouth. "Never mind. How does one buy a bond?"

"Temokeuu, no. I can't accept that. Besides, I've earned the money already. I found I had a talent and the stubbornness to make it good." She caught his hand and held it against her cheek. "You're very good, you and Tetaki." She held out her other hand to the young merman. The she laughed, the sound surprising her with its joyousness. "I've got the money to buy the bond and pay the bribes." She stood and shook her hair back over her shoulders. Then she stretched and sighed, laughing more when one hand swung against the roof beam. "You're the only two people in the world I'd tell that to, my friends. It took the skin off my back to get that money but it was worth it. Tomorrow, Tetaki, Temokeuu. Tomorrow during my halfday I go to buy my bond."

He folded his arms across his wide chest. "I have some small influence."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"I will stand for you in the court." He smiled suddenly, the shimmering tips of his opaline teeth barely visible behind his wide smooth lips, his dark green eyes glinting with a sardonic amusement. "It is surprising how much more alacritous justice becomes in the presence of influence."

She shifted uneasily, abruptly conscious of the smallness of the cabin, the closeness of the two seafolk males. "My debt becomes heavier by the minute. What can I say?"

Temokeuu's mouth twitched as he recognized her growing nervousness. He moved back and opened the door; as he stepped out he said, "When you are free, what will you do?"

"I don't know. I thought about heading south."

"Come here." He felt her hesitation. "Think about it. I'll leave you to make your decision once we're finished at court, but there is always a place for you in my house." He went quickly up the steps of a ladder and swung out onto the deck.

Gleia scrambled up beside him and stood quietly waiting for Tetaki, enjoying the feel of the breeze fingering through her hair. "I'm a thief. Remember?"

"I owe you my son's life. Sin' that day you are blood of my blood." He chuckled, a warm affectionate sound. "A small dirty-face wild thing scolding me like my mother for letting my boy walk into danger." He touched her face. "I liked your spirit. That's why I let Tetaki spend so much time wit' you. You were good for him. Come wit' us. Be a daughter of my house."

"I don't want to be a . . . to live off anyone. I want to work my own way. To owe nobody nothing."

"What make you think any of the People are allowed to drift at another's expense?" He laughed. "Go back to your place, young Gleia. Rest. Here." He handed her the jar of ointment. "Put this on what you can reach in morning. I will wait beside the Hall of Records."

On the wharf again, she found the fog had closed in thickly. She could barely see the lanterns hanging from the mast. A muscle twitched in her thigh, reminding her of the Ranga eye. She shuddered. No, she thought, no more chances. It's too dangerous. I can damn well get along without it. She limped to the end of the wharf and pulled the crystal from her pocket. For a minute she hesitated as her fingers involuntarily caressed the smooth seductive surface. Was it so bad after all? Beautiful. The crystal throbbed and warmth began to climb up her hand. "No! Go charm a fish." She flung the eye out into the water.

The fog was bunchy and treacherous around the scavenger's hovels. She walked with intense wariness, moving silently along the rutted path. The last few meters she ran full-out, forgetting the pain in her leg as shadows came at her out of the dirty yellow-white muck. She slammed the door on the reaching hands and scurried up the stairs, flitting past Miggela's ambush before the ratty figure could come out and stop her.

She stood in the doorway wrinkling her nose at the unlovely mess waiting for her. Cursing the crystal under her breath, she lit a candle at the guttering tallow dip smelling up the hall, then

marched inside, slamming the door after her. After bringing a measure of order in the chaos, she got out the brazier and the cha fixings, using the candle to light shreds of paper beneath the last of her charcoal sticks. While the water was heating she yawned and stretched, feeling amazingly good in spite of the incredible day behind her; then she pulled the cafta's ties loose and dragged it over her head. Once she had it off, she turned it over to look at the ruined back where the whip tails had sliced through the cloth. There was a weight sagging in the pocket.

She thrust her hand in and her fingers closed on a smooth curved form. Warmth leaped up her arms. Her hand came out. Came up. She couldn't open her fingers. The films of color danced around her, painted on the streamers of fog crawling through the open window. I threw it in the bay, she thought. I heard it splash. I felt it fly out of my fingers. I heard it splash. . . .

come come come come sister lover sister no
 more trouble no more pain we love and laugh and live in
 butter-rich sunlight there is no anger, no hate, no oppres-
 sion here there is no anguish here there is no hurting we
 live in beauty no hunger no want no abandoned chil-
 dren we have as gift everything everything we
 want don't fight us come will it will it
 come you can come sunlight and beauty sunlight
 and joy come come sister lover

They were all around her, glorious wraiths twittering alluringly, antennas flicking encouragement, affection, love.

come sister come

The water tin began whistling, the small shrill sound cutting through the haze. She swung around, deliberately bashing her fist into the wall, the sudden pain breaking the spell. Holding the crystal in her sore hand, she ripped a piece of the slashed cloth from the ruined cafta and tied the thing in it. She hooked the rag over the handle of the wardrobe, breathing a sigh of relief as she walked across to the whistling tin.

At the House of Records, Gleia watched Temokeuu walk through the main entrance. He looked over his shoulder at her, his narrow face with its sharp angles throwing off glints of red

and blue from the two suns, then he vanished through the door she had no right to enter. She sighed and pushed through the bonder's gate.

In the salla, body disciplined to the proper stance of humble submission, she stopped in front of the clerk's desk and waited for him to notice her.

"What do you want, bonder? Some pointless complaint? Be sure you don't waste my time." His fat arrogant face was creased in a frown meant to underline his importance. He fiddled impatiently with some papers sitting in a folder.

"By Thrim and Orik, the bonder's law," she said meekly. She fished in her pocket and pulled out a silver obol, laying it on the desk. "Thrim and Orik." She placed two more oboloi on tip of the first. "I come to buy my bond."

He grunted as he swept the coins off the top of the desk. "Straighten up, bonder. Let me see your mark."

She lifted her head.

"Closer. You think I can read the sign across the room?"

She leaned across the desk. He touched the brand. "Thief. That's fifty oboloi." His hand slid down her neck and moved inside the cafta, stroking the soft skin as he moved his pale tongue over his thick lips. "And an investigation to see if you've reformed. There's a lot of work in voiding a bond." He took a fold of her flesh between his fingers and pinched. She closed her eyes against the sudden pain. "Unless you can convince me now how reformed you are."

Gleia went stiff. She hadn't planned on paying that sort of bribe. If she refused him, he'd set a thousand niggling obstacles in her way until she exhausted her money and her strength and sank beaten back into the slow death of her bondage. She closed her eyes on her anger. If that was the cost, it was no big thing. Not when set against the thing she wanted. She thought of Abbrah. No big deal. She leaned into the fat clerk's hand, smiling at him.

He wobbled his pudgy body around to the gate and swung it open. "Interrogation room this way." As she moved through the gate, he shoved her along the hall and pushed her into a small bare room with a lumpy couch, a soiled chair, and a washstand.

Gleia pulled off her cafta and lay on the couch, waiting for him:

The Kadiff was sitting behind his high bench looking bored. He tapped long slim fingers on the desk top as the clerk led Gleia in.

"What's this?"

"Bond buyer, noble Kadiff."

"Umph. Bring her here."

Gleia came to the desk, suppressing her annoyance at the servile behavior expected of her. She glanced quickly and secretly around as she bent her body into a low bow. Temokeuu came quietly from the shadows and stood beside her. The Kadiff raised his eyebrows and looked a trifle more interested.

"Noble and honored Kadiff, may I offer a small evidence of my appreciation for your Honor's condescending to disturb your magnificent thoughts to hear my small and unimportant petition?" She reached back and touched Temokeuu's arm, inviting him to share her game. His fingers touched hers, nipped one slightly, letting her know he was appreciating her performance.

The Kadiff inclined his head and she came closer, feigning a shy timidity, inwardly contemptuous of the man for swallowing her speech, sitting there, preening himself on his importance. She placed five gold pentoboloi on the table in front of him and backed away.

He grunted and tucked the coins into one of his sleeves. "You have investigated her reform?" he asked the clerk.

"Yes, Noble Kadiff."

The Kadiff sniffed. "No doubt. Have you sent for the bond holder?"

"Yes, Noble Kadiff. The caftamaker Habbibah. The wardman was sent and should be here momentarily."

"While we're waiting you'd better send for the brander. If we have to cancel the bond, he should be here."

"It will be done, Noble Kadiff." The clerk scurried out, looking pale at having forgotten this.

The Kadiff tapped the end of his long nose with a neatly polished nail. "It's unusual to see one of the seafolk in this place." He looked around disdainfully. "Let alone one of your status, ambassador."

Gleia's eyebrows rose involuntarily. A little influence he said?

Temokeuu bowed his head with a delicately exaggerated solemnity that delighted Gleia. "I owe blood debt to this person, noble sir, and stand surety for her. She is sister and daughter, blood of my blood."

The Kadiff appeared suitably impressed. His attitude altered subtly. He sat straighter, looked more interested, and considerably more respectful. "Fifty oboloi for the bond. You need ten more

for the brander."

"I have it, Noble Kadiff." She kept her eyes on her feet.

"A lot of money. You're fortunate to have a sponsor, young woman."

Temokeuu bowed slightly. "The honor would have been mine, save that my daughter has earned the money to redeem herself."

"I didn't know sewing girls made such pay."

"If you please, Illustrious Kadiff, my designs have received some praise and brought much money into the pockets of Habbibah my bond mistress. And she has seen fit to share some of the bounty with me," Gleia murmured.

"Share!" Habbibah came storming into the room, the hapless wardman trailing behind. "The creature wouldn't work without extra pay. Why am I dragged out of my home? For this?" She jabbed a shaking finger at Gleia, then her hands went flying, touching her earrings, dabbing at her lips, brushing down over her chest. That and her angry lack of respect congealed the Kadiff's horseface into a scowl of petulant displeasure.

"Be quiet, woman." He glared at the wardman who hastily came up behind the angry Habbibah. "You are here," he went on, "as required by law to witness the cancelling of your bond."

"What!" Forgetting where she was, Habbibah shrieked and lunged at Gleia, small hands curved into claws. The wardman caught her and got a scratched face for his pains. He wrestled her back, holding her until the Kadiff's astonished roar broke through her rage, putting her on notice that she was in danger of a massive fine. The thought of losing money quieted her immediately. "I most humbly beg your pardon, Noble Kadiff," she shrilled, falling onto her knees in a position of submission. "It was only my anger at the ingratitude of this girl that made me forget myself. I gave her a home and trade and paid her well, better than she deserved, and now she wishes to leave me when the Maleeka herself has asked for her to work the cafta her daughter will wear on her nameday."

Gleia saw the Kadiff lean back, his eyes shifting uneasily between them. "May a lowly one have permission to speak, Magnificent Kadiff?"

"Granted." His eyes moved from the fuming Habbibah to the stern face of the merman. Like black bugs they oscillated back and forth as he tried to decide where his interest lay.

"The design is completed," Gleia said. She spoke slowly, clearly. "The design is the important thing. There are sewing girls with

skills greater than mine to execute the work."

The Kadiff scowled at Habbibah. "Is that true?"

Habbibah glared furiously at Gleia but didn't quite dare lie. "It's true," she muttered.

"What?"

"It's true."

The Kadiff sighed with relief. "That, I believe, answers your objection, woman. And you, bonder, I hereby cancel your bond. The fifty oboloi, if you please."

Gleia stood in front of the wardrobe. Deliberately she unhooked the rag bundle and took it to the bed. She sat holding the bundle in her lap. "Well."~

The crystal moved inside the cloth like something alive.

Rubbing the skin beside her new brand, Gleia contemplated the bundle. "Looks like I've got several ways I can go from here." She poked at the cloth, rolling the hidden eye about. "I can stay here and work for Habbibah. She knows I can quit any time and go with a competitor. I've got a lever now. Maybe could work out a good arrangement. At least I'd know what I was facing. I would, wouldn't I. I'd know what every day would be like. Every day." She shivered. "Or I could head south." She touched the stone and laughed. "And probably end up in a worse mess."

She rubbed the end of her nose, feeling warmth stroking down into her thighs from the stone. "I know what you want. Mm. I could go with Temokeuu and Tetaki. That's a leap in the dark too, but at least I'd have friends." She shook her head. "Some influence. Ambassador. Temokeuu, ah my friend."

Carefully, moving with slow deliberation, she untied the knots in the rag and touched the Ranga eye. The warmth spread up through her body and once again she saw the butterfly people. The male spun in ecstatic spirals and the others danced their jubilation. She could feel them drawing her out of her body. She wanted to let go, she wanted desperately to let go, to fly on glorious wings, free and joyous. So easy, it would be so easy just to go sailing away from all the pain and misery of her life here. Why not? Why not just go, let them take her to fly in joy under a butter-yellow sun. . . .

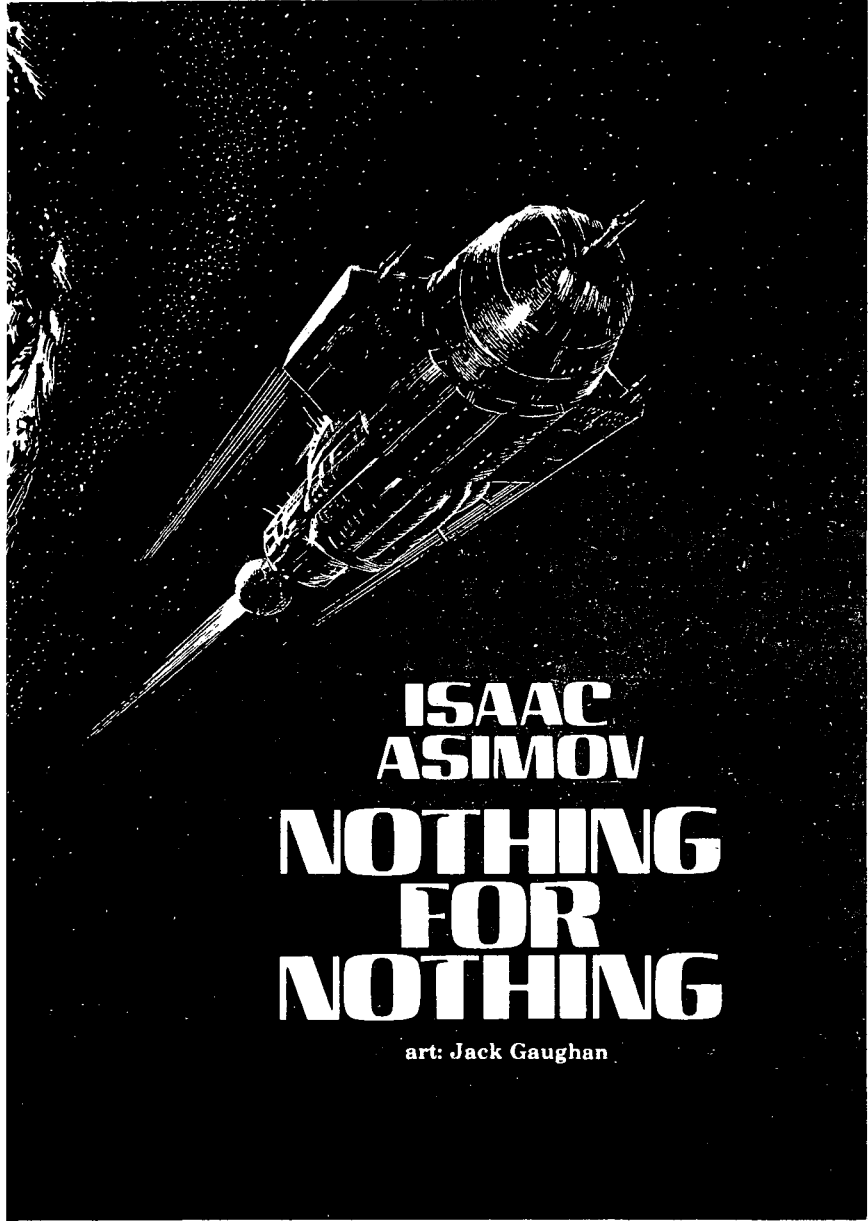
"No." She jabbed her free thumb into the new burn on her face, using the pain to wrench herself from the eye's influence. "No." She folded the rag about the stone, knotting the ends once again. Levering herself back on her feet, she took the bundle to the

wardrobe, opened the door, and tossed the rag with the Ranga eye into the back corner. "No. You're too much like a trap. How could I trust you?" She shook her head. "I'm free now. I don't want you. I don't need you. What you offer is too easy. Makes me wonder where the thorns are."

Patting her pocket to make sure her money was safe, she went down the stairs for the last time, nodded pleasantly to Miggela as the squat figure came out of her nest. No reason to bother about the old rat any more. Gleia laughed to herself as she remembered dreams of telling her landlady just what she thought of her. But it wasn't worth the wasted energy.

She stepped into the cruelly bright afternoon, pulling the cafta's hood up over her head. Without hesitation she turned into the alley, leaving behind with few regrets the drab reality of her past and the dream possibilities of the crystal. Temokeuu was waiting, would wait until sundown for her answer. She smiled and began to run past the stinking hovels.





**ISAAC
ASIMOV**

**NOTHING
FOR
NOTHING**

art: Jack Gaughan

The scene was Earth.

Not that the beings on the Starship thought of it as Earth. To them it was a series of symbols stored in a computer; it was the third planet of a star located at a certain position with respect to the line connecting their home planet with the black hole that marked the Galaxy's center, and moving at a certain velocity with reference to it.

The time was 15,000 B.C., more or less.

Not that the beings on the Starship thought of it as 15,000 B.C. To them, it was a certain period of time marked off according to their local system.

The Captain of the Starship said, rather petulantly, "This is a waste of time. The planet is largely frozen. Let us leave."

But the Ship's Explorer quietly said, "No, Captain," and that was that.

As long as a Starship was in space, or in hyperspace for that matter, the Captain was supreme; but place that ship in orbit about a planet and the Explorer could not be challenged. He knew worlds! That was his specialty.

And this Explorer was in an impregnable position. He had what amounted to a sure instinct for profitable trade. It had been he and he alone who was responsible for the fact that this particular Starship had won three Awards for Excellence for the work done in the three last expeditions. Three for three.

So when the Explorer said, "No," the Captain could not dream of "Yes." In the unlikely case that he would have dreamed of it, the crew would have mutinied. An Award for Excellence might be, to the captain, a pleasant spectral disk to suspend in the main salon; but to the crew it meant a spectacular addition to take-home pay and an even more welcome addition to vacation time and pension benefits. And this Explorer had brought them that three times. Three for three.

The Explorer said, "No strange world should be left unexamined."

The Captain said, "What is strange about this one?"

"The preliminary probe shows intelligence, and on a frozen world."

"Surely that's not unprecedented."

"The pattern here is strange." The Explorer looked uneasy. "I am not sure exactly how or exactly why, but the pattern of life and of intelligence is strange. We must examine it more carefully."

And that was that, of course. There were at least half a trillion planetary worlds in the Galaxy, if one only counted those associated with stars. Add to that the indefinite number moving independently through space and the number might be ten times as great.

Even with computers to help, no Starship could know them all; but an experienced Explorer, by dint of lacking interest in anything else, of studying every exploratory report published, of considering endless correlations, and—presumably—playing with statistics even in his sleep, grew to have what seemed to others a mystical intuition about such things.

"We'll have to send out probes in full interlocking program," said the Explorer.

The Captain looked outraged. Full power meant a leisurely examination for weeks at enormous expense.

He said, and it was as much as he could offer in the way of objection, "Is that absolutely necessary?"

"I rather think so," said the Explorer with the diffidence of one who knows his whim is law.

The probes brought back exactly what the Captain expected, and in great detail. An intelligent species rather reminiscent, at least as far as superficial appearance went, of the lesser breeds of the inner proximal regions of the fifth arm of the Galaxy—not quite unusual, but of interest to mentologists, no doubt.

As yet the intelligent species was only at the first level of technology—long, long removed from anything useful.

The Captain said so, scarcely able to mask his exasperation; but the Explorer, leafing through the reports, remained unmoved. He said, "Strange!" and asked that the Trader be summoned.

This was really too much. A successful Captain must never give a good Explorer cause for unhappiness but there are limits to everything.

The Captain said, fighting to keep the level of communication polite, if not friendly, "To what end, Explorer? What can we expect at this level?"

"They have tools," said the Explorer thoughtfully.

"Stone! Bone! Wood! Or this planet's equivalent of that. And that's all. Surely we can find nothing in that."

"And yet there is something strange in the pattern."

"May I know what that might be, Explorer?"

"If I knew what it might be, Captain, it would not be strange, and I would not have to find out. Really, Captain, I must insist on the Trader."

The Trader was as indignant as the Captain was, and had more scope to express it. His, after all, was a specialty as deep as that of anyone's on the Starship; even, in his own opinion (and in some others') as deep and as essential as the Explorer's.

The Captain might navigate a Starship and the Explorer might detect useful civilizations by the most tenuous of signs; but in the final clutch, it was the Trader and his team who faced the aliens and who plucked out of their minds and culture that which was useful and gave in return something *they* found useful.

And this was done at great risk. The alien ecology must not be disrupted. Alien intelligences must not be harmed, not even to save one's own life. There were good reasons for that on the cosmic scale and Traders were amply rewarded for the risks they ran, but why run *useless* risks.

The Trader said, "There is nothing there. My interpretation of the probe's data is that we're dealing with semi-intelligent animals. Their usefulness is nil. Their danger is great. We know how to deal with truly intelligent aliens, and Trader teams are rarely killed by them. Who knows how these animals will react—and you know we are not allowed to defend ourselves properly."

The Explorer said, "These animals, if they are no more than that, have interestingly adapted themselves to the ice. There are subtle variations in the pattern here I do not understand; but my considered opinion is that they will not be dangerous and that they may even be useful. I feel they are worth closer examination."

"What can be gained from a Stone Age intelligence?" asked the Trader.

"That is for you to find out."

The Trader thought grimly: Of course, that is what it comes to—for *us* to find out.

He knew well the history and purpose of the Starship Expeditions. There had been a time, a million years before, when there had been no Traders, Explorers, or Captains but only ancestral

animals with developing mind and a Stone Age technology—much like the animals on the world they were now orbiting. How slow the advance, how painfully slow the self-generated progress—until the third-level civilization had been reached. Then had come the Starships and the chance of cross-fertilization of cultures. *Then* had come progress.

The Trader said, "With respect, Explorer. I grant your intuitional experience. Will you grant my practical experience, though it is less dramatic? There is no way in which anything below a third-level civilization can have anything we can use."

"That," said the Explorer, "is a generalization that may or may not be true."

"With respect, Explorer. It *is* true. And even if those—those semi-animals had something we could use, and I can't imagine what it might be, what can we give them in exchange?"

The Explorer was silent.

The Trader went on. "At this level, there is no way in which a proto-intelligence can accept an alien stimulation. The mentologists are agreed on that and it is my experience, too. Progress *must* be self-generated until at least the second-level is reached. And we *must* make a return; we can take nothing for nothing."

The Captain said, "And that makes sense, of course. By stimulating these intelligences to advance, we can harvest them again at a later visit."

"I don't care about the reason for it," said the Trader, impatiently. "It is part of the tradition of my profession. We do no harm under any conditions and we give in return for what we take. Here there is nothing we will want to take; and even if we find something, there will be nothing that we can give in return. —We waste time."

The Explorer shook his head. "I ask you to visit some center of population, Trader. I will abide by your decision when you return."

And that was that, too.

For two days the small Trader module flashed over the surface of the planet searching for any evidence of a reasonable level of technology. There was none.

A complete search could take years but was scarcely worth it. It was unreasonable to suppose a high level would be hidden. The highest technology was always flaunted for it had no enemy. That was the universal experience of Traders everywhere.

It was a beautiful planet, half-frozen as it was. White and blue and green. Wild and rough and variegated. Crude and untouched.

But it was not the Trader's job to deal with beauty and he shrugged off such thoughts impatiently. When his crew talked to him in such terms, he was short with them.

He said, "We'll land here. It seems to be a good-sized concentration of the intelligences. We can do no better."

His Second said, "What can we do with even these, Maestro?"

"You can record," said the Trader. "Record the animals, both unintelligent and supposedly intelligent, and any artifacts of theirs we can find. Make sure the records are thoroughly holographic."

"We can already see—" began the Second.

"We can already see," said the Trader, "but we must have a record to convince our Explorer out of his dreams or we'll remain here forever."

"He is a good Explorer," said one of the crew.

"He has been a good Explorer," said the Trader, "but does that mean he will be good forever? His very successes have made him accept himself at too high an evaluation, perhaps. So we must convince him of reality—if we can."

They wore their suits when they emerged from the module.

The planetary atmosphere would support them; but the feeling of exposure to the raw winds of an open planet would discommode them, even if the atmosphere and temperature were perfect—which they weren't. The gravity was a touch high, as was the light level; but they could bear it.

The intelligent beings, dressed rather sketchily in the outer portions of other animals, retreated reluctantly at their approach and watched at a distance. The Trader was relieved at this. Any sign of non-belligerence was welcome to those who were not permitted to defend themselves.

The Trader and his crew did not try to communicate directly or to make friendly gestures. Who knew what gesture might be considered friendly by an alien? The Trader set up a mental field, instead, and saturated it with the vibrations of harmlessness and peace and hoped that the mental fields of the creatures were sufficiently advanced to respond.

Perhaps they were, for a few crept back and watched motionlessly as though intensely curious. The Trader thought he detected fugitive thoughts—but that seemed unlikely for first-level beings and he did not follow them up.

Instead, he went stolidly about the business of making holographic reproductions of the vegetation, of a herd of blundering herbivores that appeared and then, deciding the surroundings were dangerous, thundered away. A large animal stood its ground for a while, exposing white weapons in a cavity at its fore-end—then left.

The Trader's crew worked similarly, moving methodically across the landscape.

The call, directly mental, and surcharged with such emotion of surprise and awe that the informational content was all but blurred out, came unexpectedly.

"Maestro! Here! Come quickly!"

Specific directions were not given. The Trader had to follow the beam, which led into a crevice bounded by two rocky outcroppings.

Other members of the crew were converging but the Trader had arrived first.

"What is it?" asked the Trader.

His Second was standing in the glow of his suit-radiation in a deeply hollowed-out portion of the hillside.

The Trader looked about, "This is a natural hollow, not a technological product."

"Yes, but look!"

The Trader looked up and for perhaps five seconds he was lost. Then he sent out a strenuous message for all others to stay away.

He said, "Is this of technological origin?"

"Yes, Maestro. You can see it is only partly completed."

"But by whom?"

"By those creatures out there. The intelligent ones. I found one at work in here. This is his light source; it was burning vegetation. These are his tools."

"And where is he?"

"He fled."

"Did you actually see him?"

"I recorded him."

The Trader pondered. Then he looked up again. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"No, Maestro."

"Or heard of anything like this?"

"No, Maestro."

"Astonishing!"

The Trader showed no signs of wanting to withdraw his eyes, and the Second said, softly, "Maestro. What do we do?" —
"Eh?"

"This will surely win our ship still a fourth Prize."

"Surely," said the Trader, regretfully, "if we could take it."

The Second said, hesitantly, "I have already recorded it."

"Eh? What is the use of that? We have nothing to give in exchange."

"But we have this of theirs. Give them *anything* in exchange."

The Trader said, "What are you *saying*? They are too primitive to accept anything we could give them. It will surely be nearly a million years before they could possibly accept suggestions of exogenous origin. — We will have to destroy the recording."

"But we *know*, Maestro."

"Then we must never talk about it. Our craft has its ethics and its traditions. You know that. Nothing for nothing!"

"Even this?"

"Even this."

The Trader's sternly implacable set of expression was tinged with unbearable sorrow and despite his "Even this" he stood ir-resolute.

The Second sensed that. He said, "Try giving them something, Maestro."

"Of what use would that be?"

"Of what harm?"

The Trader said, "I have prepared a presentation for the entire Starship, but I must show it to you first, Explorer—with deep respect and with apologies for masked thoughts. You were right. There *was* something strange about this planet. Though the intelligences on the planet were barely first level and though their technology was primitive in the extreme, they had developed a concept we have never had and one that, to my knowledge, we have never encountered on any other world."

The Captain said, uneasily, "I cannot imagine what it might be." He was quite aware that Traders sometimes overpraised their purchases to magnify their own worth.

The Explorer said nothing. He was the more uneasy of the two.

The Trader said, "It is a form of visual art."

"Playing with color?" asked the Captain.

"And shape—but to most startling effect." He had arranged the holographic projector. "Observe!"

In the viewing space before them, a herd of animals appeared: bulky, shaggy, two-horned, four-legged. They hesitated, then ran, dust spurting up beneath their hooves.

"Ugly objects," muttered the Captain.

The holographic recording brought the herd to a halt, clamped it down to a still. It magnified; and a single beast filled the view, its bulky head lowered, its nostrils distended.

"Observe this animal," said the Trader, "and now observe this artificial composition of a primitive concoction of oil and colored mineral, which we found smeared over the roof of a cave."

There it was again! Not quite the animal as holographed—flat, but vibrant.

"What a peculiar similarity," said the Captain.

"Not peculiar," said the Trader. "Deliberate! There were dozens of such figures in different poses—of different animals. The likenesses were too detailed to be fortuitous. Imagine the boldness of the conception—to place colors in pleasing shapes and combinations, and in such a way as to deceive the eye into thinking it is looking at a real object. These organisms have devised an art that represents reality. It is representational art, as I suppose we might call it.

"And that's not all. We found it done in three dimensions also." The Trader produced an array of small figures in grey stone and in faintly-yellow bone. "These are clearly intended to represent themselves."

The Captain seemed stupefied. "Did you see these manufactured?"

"No, that I did not, Captain. One of my men saw a planetary being smearing color on one of the cave representations, but these we found already formed. Still, no other explanation is possible than that they were deliberately shaped. These objects could not have assumed these shapes by chance processes."

The Captain said, "These are curious, but one doesn't follow the motive. Would not holographic techniques serve the purpose better—at such times as these are developed, of course?"

"These primitives have no conception that holography could someday be developed and could not wait the million years required. Then, too, maybe holography is *not* better. If you compare the representations with the originals you will notice that the representations are simplified and distorted in subtle ways designed to bring certain characteristics into focus. I believe this form of art *improves* on the original in some ways and certainly

has something different to say."

The Trader turned to the Explorer. "I stand in awe at your abilities. Can you explain how you sensed the uniqueness of this intelligence?"

The Explorer signed a negative. "I did not suspect this at all. It is interesting and I see its worth—although I wonder if we could ourselves properly control our colors and shapes in order to force them into such representational form. Yet this does not match the unease within me. —What I wonder is how you came into possession of these? What did you give in exchange? It is *there* I see the strangeness lie."

"Well," said the Trader, "in a way you're right. Quite strange. I did not think I could give anything since the organisms are so primitive, but this discovery seemed too important to sacrifice without some effort. I therefore chose from among the group of beings who formed these objects one whose mental field seemed somewhat more intense than that of the others and attempted to transfer to him a gift in exchange."

"And succeeded. Of course," said the Explorer.

"Yes, I succeeded," said the Trader happily, failing to notice that the Explorer had made a statement and had not asked a question. "The beings," the Trader went on, "kill such animals as they represent in color, by throwing long sticks tipped with sharpened stone. These penetrate the hides of the animal, wound and weaken them. They can then be killed by the beings who are individually smaller and weaker than the animal they hunt. I pointed out that a smaller, stone-tipped stick could be hurled forward with greater force and effect and with longer range if a cord under tension were used as the mechanism of propulsion."

The Explorer said, "Such devices have been encountered among primitive intelligences which were, however, far advanced beyond these. Paleomentalists call it a bow-and-arrow."

The Captain said, "How could the knowledge be absorbed? It couldn't be, at this level of development."

"But it *was*. Unmistakeably. The response of the mental field was one of insight at almost unbearable intensity. —Surely you do not think I would have taken these art objects, were they twenty times as valuable, if I had not been convinced that I had made a return? Nothing for nothing, Captain."

The Explorer said in a low, despondent voice, "There is the strangeness. To accept."

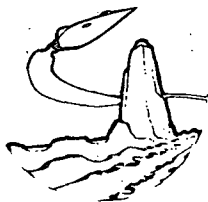
The Captain said, "But surely, Trader, we cannot do this. They

are not ready. We are harming them. They will use the bow-and-arrow to wound each other and not the beasts alone."

The Trader said, "*We* do not harm them and we *did* not harm them. What *they* do to each other and where they end as a result, a million years from now, is their concern."

The Captain and the Trader left to set up the demonstration for the Starship's company, and the Explorer said sadly in the direction in which they had gone: "But they accepted. And they flourish amid the ice. And in twenty thousand years, it will be *our* concern."

He knew they would not believe him, and he despaired.



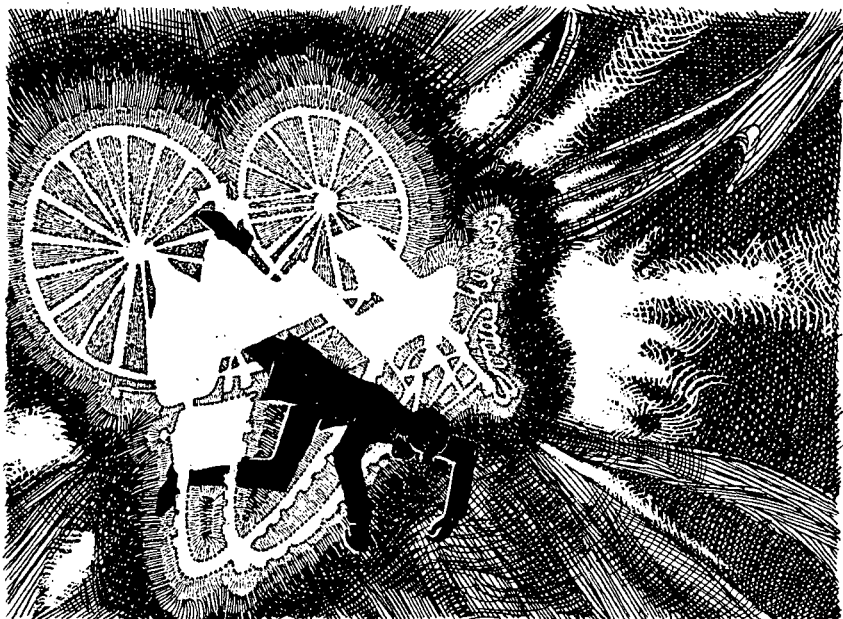
THE ADVENTURE OF THE GLOBAL TRAVELER

or:

THE GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES
OF HOW THE REICHENBACH FALLS
INTO THE WELLS OF INIQUITIE

by Anne Lear

Art: Freff



*Most of the author's professional sales
heretofore have been in popular history.*

*With this sale, she has won a contest
with her husband to see who can sell a
mystery first; this is also her first
SF sale. Shakespeare and Sherlock
are their household gods.*

All I wanted was to find out who the Third Murderer in *Macbeth* really was. Well, I know now. I also know the secret identity and the fate of one famous personage, that the death of another occurred many years before it was reported to have done, and a hitherto unknown detail of Wm. Shakespeare's acting career.

Which just goes to show what a marvelous place to do research is the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. In the crowded shelves and vaults of that great storehouse are treasures in such number and variety that even their passionately devoted caretakers do not know the whole.

In my quest for the Third Murderer I started at the logical place. I looked in the card catalogue under M for Murderer. I didn't find the one I had in mind; but I found plenty of others and, being of the happy vampire breed, switched gleefully onto the sidetrack offered.

Here was gore to slake a noble thirst: murders of apprentices by their masters; murders of masters by apprentices; murders of husbands by wives, wives by husbands, children by both. Oh, it was a bustling time, the Age of Elizabeth! Broad-sides there were and pamphlets, each juicier than the last.

The titles were the best of it perhaps. Yellow journalism is a mere lily in these declining days. Consider:

A true discourse. Declaring the damnable life and death of one Stubbe Peeter, a most wicked Sorcerer, who in the likeness of a Woolf, committed many murders . . . Who for the same fact was taken and executed . . .

or

Newes from Perin in Cornwall:

Of a most Bloody and unexampled Murther very lately committed by a Father on his own Sonne . . . at the Instigation of a merciless Step-mother . . .

or the truly spectacular

Newes out of Germanie. A most wonderful and true discourse of a cruell murderer, who had kylled in his life tyme, nine hundred, threescore and odde persons, among which six of them were his owne children begotten on a young women which he forceable kept in a caue seven yeeres . . .

(This particular murtherer is on record as having planned, with true Teutonic neatness of mind, to do in precisely one thousand people and then retire.)

Eventually I found myself calling for *The moft horrible and tragick murther, of the right Honorable, the vertuous and valer-*

ous gentleman, John Lord Bourgh, Baron of Castell Connell. committed by Arnold Cosby, the foureteenth of Ianuarie. Togeather with the forrofull fighes of a fadde foule, vppon his funeral: written by W.R., a feruant of the faid Lord Bourgh.

The pamphlet was sent up promptly to the muffled, gorgeously Tudor reading room, where I signed for it and carried it off to one of the vast mahogany tables that stand about the room and intimidate researchers.

As I worked my way through the blackletter, I found the promising title to be a snare and a delusion. The story turned out to be a mediocre one about a social-climbing coward who provoked a duel and then, unable to get out of it, stabbed his opponent on the sly. Pooh. I was about to send it back, when I noticed an inappropriate thickness. A few pages beyond where I had stopped (at the beginning of the forrofull fighes) the center of the pamphlet seemed thicker than the edges. 'Tis some other reader's notes, I muttered, only this and nothing more.

So, it appeared when I turned to them, they were. There were four thin sheets, small enough to fit into the octavo pamphlet with more than an inch of margin on every side. The paper was of a good quality, much stronger than the crumbling pulp which had concealed it.

I hadn't a clue as to how long ago the sheets had been put there. They might have gone unnoticed for years, as the librarians and users of the ultra-scholarly Folger are not much given to murder as recreation, even horrible and tragicall murders of the vertuous and valerous, and therefore they don't often ask for the bloody pulps.

Further, the descriptive endorsement on the envelope made no mention of the extra sheets, as it surely would have done had they been any part of the collection.

I hesitated briefly. People tend to be touchy about their notes, academicians more than most, as plagiarism ramps about universities more vigorously than anyone likes to admit. The writing was difficult in any case, a tiny, crabbéd scribble. It had been done with a steel pen, and the spellings and style were for the most part those of *fin de siècle* England, with a salting of unexpected Jacobean usages. The paper was clearly well aged, darkened from a probable white to a pale brown, uniformly because of its protected position, and the ink cannot have been new, having faded to a medium brown.

My scruples were, after all, academic, as I had inevitably read

part of the first page while I examined it. And anyway, who was I kidding?

"On this bleak last night of the year I take up my pen, my anachronistic steel pen which I value highly among the few relics I have of my former—or is it my future?—life, to set down a record which stands but little chance of ever being seen by any who can comprehend it.

"The political situation is becoming dangerous even for me, for all that I am arranging to profit by my foreknowledge of events as well as from the opportunities civil confusion offers to those who know how to use it. However, my prescience does not in this or any other way extend to my own fate, and I would fain leave some trace of myself for those who were my friends, perhaps even more for one who was my enemy. Or will be.

"To settle this point at once: those events which are my past are the distant future for all around me. I do not know what they may be for you who read this, as I cannot guess at what date my message will come to light. For my immediate purpose, therefore, I shall ignore greater realities and refer only to my own lifeline, calling my present *the present* and my past *the past*, regardless of 'actual' dates.

"To begin at approximately the beginning, then, I found it necessary in the spring of 1891 to abandon a thriving business in London. As head of most of Britain's criminal activities—my arch-enemy, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, once complimented me with the title 'The Napoleon of Crime'."

At this point my eyes seemed to fix themselves immovably. They began to glaze over. I shook myself back to full consciousness, and my hand continued to shake slightly as I slipped the pamphlet back into its envelope and the strange papers, oh so casually, into my own notes. After an experimental husk or two I decided my voice was functional and proceeded to return the pamphlet and thank the librarian. Then I headed for the nearest bar, in search of a quiet booth and beer to wash the dryness of astonishment and the dust of centuries from my throat.

The afternoon was warm, a golden harbinger in a grey March, and the interior of the Hawk and Dove, that sturdy Capitol Hill saloon, was invitingly dark. It was also nearly empty, which was soothing to electrified nerves. I spoke vaguely to a waitress, and by the time I had settled onto a wooden bench polished by but-

tocks innumerable, beer had materialized before me, cold and gold in a mug.

The waitress had scarcely completed her turn away from my table before I had the little pages out of my portfolio and angled to catch the light filtering dustily in through the mock-Victorian colored window on my left.

"... I had wealth and power in abundance. However, Holmes moved against me more effectively than I had anticipated, and I was forced to leave for the Continent on very short notice. I had, of course, made provision abroad against such exigency, and, with the help of Colonel Moran, my ablest lieutenant, led Holmes into a trap at the Reichenbach Falls.

"Regrettably, the trap proved unsuccessful. By means of a Japanese wrestling trick I was forced to admire even as it precipitated me over the edge, Holmes escaped me at the last possible moment. He believed he had seen me fall to my death, but this time it was he who had underestimated his opponent.

"A net previously stretched over the gulf, concealed by an aberration of the falls' spray and controlled by Moran, lay ready to catch me if I fell. Had it been Holmes who went over the edge, Moran would have retracted the net to permit his passage down into the maelstrom at the cliff's foot. A spring-fastened dummy was released from the underside of the net by the impact of my weight, completing the illusion.

"I returned to England in the character of an experimental mathematician, a *persona* I had been some years in developing, as at my Richmond residence I carried out the mathematical researches which had been my first vocation. I had always entertained there men who were at the head of various academic, scientific, and literary professions, and my reputation as an erudite, generous host was well established. It was an ideal concealment for me throughout the next year, while my agents, led by the redoubtable Colonel, tracked Mr. Holmes on his travels, and I began to rebuild my shadowy empire.

"During this time I beguiled my untoward leisure with concentrated research into the nature of Time and various paradoxes attendant thereon. My work led me eventually to construct a machine which would permit me to travel into the past and future.

"I could not resist showing the Time Machine to a few of my friends, most of whom inclined to believe it a hoax. One of the

more imaginative of them, a writer named Wells, seemed to think there might be something in it, but even he was not fully convinced. No matter. They were right to doubt the rigmarole I spun out for them about what I saw on my travels. Mightily noble it sounded, not to say luridly romantic—Weena indeed!—although, as a matter of fact, some few parts were even true.

"Obviously, the real use to which I put the Machine during the 'week' between its completion and my final trip on it was the furtherance of my professional interests. It was especially convenient for such matters as observing, and introducing judicious flaws into, the construction of bank vaults and for gathering materials for blackmail. Indeed, I used 'my' time well and compiled quite an extensive file for eventual conversion into gold.

"As I could always return to the same time I had left, if not an earlier one, the only limit to the amount of such travelling I could do lay in my own constitution, and that has always been strong.

"My great mistake was my failure to notice the wearing effect all this use was having on the Time Machine. To this day I do not know what part of the delicate mechanism was damaged, but the ultimate results were anything but subtle.

"I come at last to the nature of my arrival at this place and time. Having learned early of the dangers attendant upon being unable to move the Time Machine, I had added to its structure a set of wheels and a driving chain attached to the pedals originally meant simply as foot rests. In short, I converted it into a Time Velocipede.

"It was necessary to exercise caution in order to avoid being seen trundling this odd vehicle through the streets of London during my business forays, but there was nothing to prevent my riding about to my heart's content in the very remote past, providing always that I left careful markings at my site of arrival.

"Thus did I rest from my labors by touring on occasion through the quiet early days of this sceptered isle—a thief's privilege to steal, especially from a friend—ere ever sceptre came to it. Most interesting it was, albeit somewhat empty for one of my contriving temperament.

"It was, then, as I was riding one very long ago day beside a river I found it difficult to realize from its unfamiliar contours would one day be the Thames, that the Velocipede struck a hidden root and was thrown suddenly off balance. I flung out a hand to stabilize myself and, in doing so, threw over the controls, sending myself rapidly forward in time.

"Days and nights passed in accelerating succession, with the concomitant dizziness and nausea I had come to expect but never to enjoy, and this time I had no control of my speed. I regretted even more bitterly than usual the absences of gauges to indicate temporal progress. I had never been able to solve the problem of their design; and now, travelling in this haphazard fashion, I had not the least idea when I might be.

"I could only hope with my usual fervency and more that I should somehow escape the ultimate hazard of merging with a solid object—or a living creature—standing in the same place as I at the time of my halt. Landing in a time-fostered meander of the Thames would be infinitely preferable.

"The swift march of the seasons slowed, as I eased the control lever back, and soon I could perceive the phases of the moon, then once again the alternating light and dark of the sun's diurnal progression.

"Then all of a sudden the unperceived worn part gave way. The Machine disintegrated under me, blasted into virtual nothingness, and I landed without a sound, a bit off balance, on a wooden floor.

"A swift glance around me told me my doom. Whenever I was, it was in no age of machines nor of the delicate tools I required to enable my escape.

"Reeling for a moment with the horror of my position, I felt a firm nudge in the ribs. A clear, powerful voice was asking loudly, 'But who did bid thee join with us?'

"The speaker was a handsome man of middle age, with large, dark eyes, a widow's peak above an extraordinary brow with a frontal development nearly as great as my own, a neat moustache, and a small, equally neat beard. He was muffled in a dark cloak and hood, but his one visible ear was adorned with a gold ring. As I stood dumbly wondering, he nudged me again, and I looked in haste beyond him for enlightenment.

"The wooden floor was a platform, in fact a stage. Below on one side and above on three sides beyond were crowds of people dressed in a style I recognized as that of the early seventeenth century.

"Another nudge, fierce and impatient: 'But who did bid thee join with us?'

"The line was familiar, from a play I knew well. The place, this wooden stage all but surrounded by its audience—could it possibly be the Globe? In that case, the play... the play must be... 'MACBETH!' I all but shouted, so startled was I at the sud-

den apprehension.

"The man next to me expelled a small sigh of relief. A second man, heretofore unnoticed by me, spoke up quickly from my other side. 'He needs not our mistrust, since he delivers our offices and what we have to do, to the direction just.'

"Then stand with us,' said the first man, who I now realized must be First Murderer. A suspicion was beginning to grow in my mind as to his offstage identity as well, but it seemed unlikely. We are told that the Bard only played two roles in his own plays: old Adam in *As you Like it*, and King Hamlet's ghost. Surely . . . but my reflections were cut off short, as I felt myself being covertly turned by Second Murderer to face upstage.

"First Murderer's sunset speech was ended, and I had a line to speak. I knew it already, having been an eager Thespian in my university days. Of course, to my companions and others I could see watching from the wings most of the lines we were speaking were spontaneous. 'Hark!' said I. 'I hear horses.'

"Banquo called for a light 'within', within being the little curtained alcove at the rear of the stage. Second Murderer consulted a list he carried and averred that it must be Banquo we heard, as all the other expected guests were already gone into the court. First Murderer proffered me a line in which he worried about the horses' moving away; and I reassured him to the effect that they were being led off by servants to the stables, so that Banquo and Fleance could walk the short way in. 'So all men do,' I said, 'From hence to th' Palace Gate make it their walk.'

"Banquo and Fleance entered. Second Murderer saw them coming by the light that Fleance carried, and I identified Banquo for them, assisted in the murder—carefully, for fear habit might make me strike inconveniently hard—and complained about the light's having been knocked out and about our having failed to kill Fleance.

"And then we were in the wings, and I had to face my new acquaintances. Second Murderer was no serious concern, as he was a minor person in the company. First Murderer was a different matter altogether, however, for my conjecture had proved to be the truth, and I was in very fact face to face with William Shakespeare.

"I am a facile, in fact a professional, liar and had no trouble in persuading them that I was a man in flight and had hidden from my pursuers in the 'within' alcove, to appear among them thus unexpectedly. That Shakespeare had been so quick of wit to save

his own play from my disruption was no marvel; that the young player had followed suit was matter for congratulation from his fellows; that I had found appropriate lines amazed them all. I explained that I had trod the boards at one time in my life and, in answer to puzzled queries about my strange garb, murmured some words about having spent time of late amongst the sledged Polack, which I supposed would be mysterious enough and did elicit a flattered smile from the playwright.

"As to my reasons for being pursued, I had only to assure my new friends that my troubles were of an amatory nature in order to gain their full sympathy. They could not afford openly to harbor a fugitive from justice, although players of that time, as of most times, tended to the shady side of the law, and these would gladly have helped me to any concealment that did not bring them into immediate jeopardy. As I was but newly arrived in the country from my travels abroad, lacked employment, and could perform, they offered me a place in the company, which I accepted gladly.

"I did not need the pay, as I had observed my customary precaution of wearing a waistcoat whose lining was sewn full of jewels, the universal currency. However, the playhouse afforded me an ideal *locus* from which to begin making the contacts that have since established me in my old position as 'the Napoleon of crime', ludicrous title in a time more than a century before Napoleon will be born.

"As to how my lines came to be part of the play's text, Will himself inserted them just as the three of us spoke them on the day. He had been filling the First Murderer part that afternoon by sheer good luck, the regular player being ill, and he found vastly amusing the idea of adding an unexplained character to create a mystery for the audience. He had no thought for future audiences and readers, certainly not for recondite scholarship, but only sought to entertain those for whom he wrote: the patrons of the Globe and Blackfriars and the great folk at Court.

"I am an old man now, and, in view of the civil strife soon to burst its festering sores throughout the country, I may not live to be a much older one. I have good hopes, however. Knowing the outcome is helpful, and I have taken care to cultivate the right men. Roundheads, I may say, purchase as many vices as Cavaliers, for all they do it secretly and with a tighter clasp on their purses.

"Still, I shall leave this partial record now, not waiting until I



have liberty to set down a more complete one. If you who read it do so at any time during the last eight years of the nineteenth century, or perhaps even for some years thereafter, I beg that you will do me the great favor to take or send it to Mr. Sherlock Holmes at 221-B Baker Street, London.

"Thus, in the hope that he may read this, I send my compliments and the following poser:

"The first time the Third Murderer's lines were ever spoken, *they were delivered from memory.*

"Pray, Mr. Holmes, who wrote them?"

"Moriarty

"London

"31st December 1640"

A TIME FOR TERROR

by Frederick Longbeard

art: Alex Schomburg





Mr. Longbeard was born in Harrisburg PA, six days after Corregidor fell to the Japanese Imperial Army, and grew up in a succession of military schools and the U.S. Army, where he tested and repaired HAWK missiles. He has been a production manager for a microfilm company, published some philosophy under another name, and lost a race for the Maine State Legislature to a used-car salesman.

I.

The others were dead. As I lay there, my hands bound behind me, searching the darkness for a speck of light, it kept running through my mind: They're dead; they're dead, all dead. . . . The Terranists had hit us as though they were storm-driven. One second the new commandant of security was putting the number-two Terranist on display for the press—then, chaos. The commandant and guards fell a split moment after the doors blew off their hinges; I saw that hack reporter Dubord get it an instant later. All dead.

The dryness of the dark place could be felt, and I turned my face from the dusty floor, coughing. With effort, I worked up enough spit to wet my tongue, then my cracked lips. Lowering the back of my head to the floor, I held my breath and listened for the mass drivers. They said you could hear them anywhere on the Lunar surface if you were against bedrock. So, either I wasn't on the Lunar surface, against bedrock, or they were full of it. Voices, dim and distant.

Doubling up, I pushed against the dusty floor with my shoulder and right knee and teetered into a sitting position. The gravity said Luna. More voices, soft footsteps against dusty rock, a hand on a door latch. In the dark, flashes of the Terranist commandos exploded before my eyes. Men, women, police or civilian—no difference—all dead. Loud, muffled orders from behind a door. The lump in my throat, my fear, grew to where it became difficult to breathe. A light metal door slammed open against a wall. Outlined by the dim light from outside was a hand against the door and the muzzle of a weapon. As dim as it was, the light made me close my eyes. When I opened them, the outline of someone in

surface gear filled the doorway. Behind the figure, others were moving back and forth, shouting and carrying things.

"On your feet, munie." The figure waved the gun at me. "Let's go; move it! You're not dead. Yet."

I looked behind me and saw a rough-cut wall. Pushing my legs, I backed up against it and used my hands and shoulders to inch up the wall. Still leaning against the wall, I turned toward the armed figure. "Where am I?"

"Come out of there."

"Can I at least have some water?"

The figure stood motionless for a second. "Laddie, your only chance of lasting out the next thirty seconds is to do exactly as I say." The figure backed out of the doorway and waved the muzzle of his gun. "Let's go."

I pushed off from the wall, made it to the door and stepped out into the corridor. As I worked my jaw around, I could feel the blood caked on the right side of my face. Nameless with the gun gave me a dig in the kidney and I turned right. I'm usually ready to give a man with a gun any kind of slack he asks for. But that only applies when the gunsels trades me my life for following his orders. When it's a plus or minus thirty seconds in exchange for bruised organs, the hell with it. I whirled around to plant a knee amongst his family jewels, but instead, met a rifle stock upside the right side of my head. Unfortunately, I didn't black out. When the chimes in my head quieted down, I spit out the dust from the corridor floor, along with a few teeth, and looked back at my keeper. He wore the traditional greyish surface suit, helmet cracked back, except his suit looked in bad repair and had a broad red stripe painted around the chest. He waved his gun up and down.

"Get up, stupid, and head down the walk. Another performance like that will earn you a bolt through your kneecap."

On my knees, I looked up at him. "You're not going to kill me, are you?"

His face was round, dark, and cruel. He smiled, and a laugh started somewhere around his feet and rumbled out of his mouth. "Laddie, that depends on how much trouble you are alive."

Another red-banded figure pulled up to us carrying a crate and nodded toward my keeper. "Need a hand, Ahmis?"

He shook his head. "No." He cocked his head toward me. "On your feet, harmless." Again, he waved his gun up and down. I put one leg forward and stood, spitting blood on the floor. I looked at

the four gleaming white teeth among the blood and dust of the corridor floor, remembering out of a childhood long forgotten that the most terrible thing in the world was getting a tooth knocked out. I looked at the face of my keeper. There was no remorse, nor even a hint of pity. "Turn around and stop at the next door to your left."

I turned, my cheek and jaw throbbing with indescribable aches. Three more red-banded figures, two women and a man, raced past headed in the opposite direction. One slow foot at a time, I walked the remaining few meters to the door. As I reached it, I stopped and turned toward my keeper. "I'd open it with my teeth, but I left them back in the walk."

My keeper nodded. "Very brave, little boy. Perhaps one of us will live to tell the Earth how brave you are."

He reached out and unlatched the door, pushing me in after. The room was much like the one I had just left, except for the light and the company. Behind a rude metal table sat a bearded fellow with a crown of brown hair circling his otherwise hairless dome. His facial features were identical to every representation of Jesus Christ I'd ever seen, except for the dark, haunted eyes. He pointed at a stool before the table. "Sit. My name is Rudy Vegler." He nodded toward a figure seated in the shadows. "You have already met Raymond."

I lowered myself onto the stool, trying to make out the face of the number-two Terranist. I had seen him at the news conference, but for some reason couldn't remember his face. My keeper stood behind me, his gun at the ready. Both Vegler and the one called Raymond wore surface gear.

"Why am I here?"

Vegler nodded slightly. "Yes, Mark Lambert, why are you here? You are alive because we cannot answer that question. Tell us."

I laughed. I suppose I resigned myself to being a dead man, and that helped ease my tension. After I was dead, I couldn't be hurt. Go out with style, or something stupid like that. "I didn't kill twenty men and women and drag me here. You tell me."

Vegler shook his head. "It was only eighteen." He leaned forward, the red band of his surface suit against the edge of the table. "Lambert, do you know what being surfaced is?"

"No."

"We kick you outside with no suit." He rubbed the side of his nose. "I understand that boiling blood is a very, very painful way to go." He smiled, exposing a gap in twin rows of yellowing teeth.

"Of course, those in a position to know are in no position to tell. Why are you here?"

I shrugged. "Honesty won't get me any points. Why should I tell you?"

Vegler dropped his smile. "Lambert, we don't have time to waste—you don't have time to waste. Why are you on Luna?"

There it was: the question. I dropped my glance to the red band around Vegler's chest. "I'm a sound tech with the *Los Angeles Telejournal*. I was sent up with Harvy Dubord to cover . . ."

Vegler held up his hand. "I said we don't have time." He lowered it to the table. "Feed your cover story to the lockwatchers, but to us, nothing but the truth."

With puffy lips, missing teeth, and blood dribbling from my mouth, I managed the best sneer I could. "Why should I tell you anything? You're going to kill me, aren't you?"

"No decision has been made."

I snorted, dribbling more blood down my chin and coveralls. "I saw you bastards slaughter innocent men and women with less compassion than I throw out my garbage."

In the shadows, the one called Raymond uttered a brief, bitter laugh. "Lambert, we have more compassion for your garbage than we do for the munies." He leaned forward, bringing his face into the light. His fine blond hair was matted and caked with blood, his skin pale and greenish around his almost delicate jaw. The narrow-set, pale blue eyes were almost hypnotic in their attraction. "Lambert, we are evacuating this site. When we leave, we will make it useless. What we need to know is whether or not it is worth our while to spend surface gear, water, and air on your survival."

I turned to Vegler. "I find it hard to believe that anything I can say will improve my chances one bit."

Vegler rubbed his nose. "The information we have from Earth-side says you are a reporter working undercover for the *L.A. Telejournal*. Your exact assignment is somewhat vague, but it concerns an investigation into the possible manipulation of news from Luna."

I felt as though Ahmis, the happy jailer, had tapped me again with his gun butt. Only five persons knew: me, my editor, the publisher, the lawyer called in to hand out a heap of ignored advice, and the New York Bureau Chief, Margate. But Margate had said that to feed a fake ID to the MAC VI would involve developing mob contacts. You tell the mob and you tell anyone who has the

price of a whisper. It had been assumed that no one on Luna, particularly the Terranists, could raise the ante. "If you know that, why the question? Why not just kill me and be done with it?"

Vegler unlatched the collar ring on his suit, pulled the seal to the middle of his chest, reached inside and scratched. "Tell me, Lambert: is this information we've discovered, or crap that we've been fed?"

"What difference does it make?"

"If it's true, you live; if not . . ." Vegler pointed up, towards the surface.

"What else would I be?"

"A police spy."

I smiled and immediately regretted it as the throb in my cheek grew. "What about you? What if this is some production number by the police to get me to admit to something?"

Vegler resealed his suit. "You overestimate your importance. It will be a long time before the lockwatchers have a commandant killed just to ferret out a reporter." He raised his eyebrows. "That would be even too extreme for us."

I shrugged. "What if I am what you say I am?"

Vegler looked at Raymond. Number-two man nodded a permission, then leaned back into the shadows. Vegler turned back to me. "Then you may be of some use to us. We have been trying to get the truth to Earth for a long time."

"Terranist truth."

"Explain."

"I'm not here to do propaganda pieces for the Terranist League. Remember, I've seen your killers in action, and all it does is confirm everything I've ever seen or heard about the Terranists."

"Be that as it may, Lambert, there is still the small matter of convincing us that you are a reporter. If you can't, it's the last time you'll see anyone or anything in action."

I think that, for the first time since entering that room, I began believing I might somehow get out of my predicament in one piece. "What do you want to know?"

"Begin with why none of the registers, the official ones, list you as a reporter."

"I never have been listed as a reporter. It's a new position for me, but because of its nature, I couldn't be listed." Vegler was frowning. "Look, up until a few weeks ago, I was a sound tech. But I've been trying to get in reporting for years. I'd pestered the station editor about it so many times, he told me to come up with

an idea and, if it was any good, he'd see. He liked my idea."

"What was the idea?"

"To come up here as a sound tech, poke around and see if the governor's office has anything to hide. I got the idea from a camera jock who was with our team covering the capture of Tralcor. The story he told me about the press conference didn't seem to have anything to do with what the reporters on Luna put on the tape loops."

Vegler nodded. "And?"

"Then I overheard one of our reporters a few days later. He had been assigned the story, but Immigration rejected his blood test. The *Telejournal* sent Harvy Dubord instead, and the reporter I overheard was complaining. Dubord is what we call a 'safe' voice—a reporter the government can count on not to embarrass it." I felt as though my fingers were about to fall off, and nodded back over my right shoulder. "Is there something you can do about my hands?"

"We're doing it. Go on."

"Well, I thought of another reporter that had been turned down, then did some checking. From the *Telejournal*, at least, nothing but safe voices have ever been sent to Luna since the Plague. That includes writers as well as . . ."

Vegler held up his hand. "And you suspected that the government was using the blood tests as a way of screening reporters?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

I shrugged, sending darts of pain from my wrists up my arms. "I don't know. That's what I'm here to find out."

Vegler looked at Raymond, then turned back toward me. "One more question: How did you plan on getting your tapes back to Earth?"

"The mass drivers. The *Telejournal* has arranged for a small ship to pick the tapes out of the dirt track before they reach the catcher station." My throat felt raw from the dryness. "From there, the tapes would be taken to the New Eden industrial station at El Five and then broadcast."

"I see." Vegler nodded. "Wouldn't those pulses in the driver wipe the tapes?"

I started to shake my head, but thought better of it. "I had a specially shielded case. It was with me at the news conference. . . ."

Vegler nodded at my keeper. I felt the muzzle of his gun dig in

between my shoulder blades. "Get up, laddie."

I stood and heard the door open behind me. I kept my eyes on Vegler. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Do I live or die?"

Vegler shook his head. "As I said, no decision has been made." He nodded again at the guard and I felt a hand fall on my shoulder. The guard turned me around and shoved me out into the walk. He followed and closed the door, pulling a long knife from the belt of his surface suit.

"Turn around." I felt the knife slip between my hands and the bonds part. Immediately, blood, feeling and pain began flowing from my arms into my hands. I turned and faced my keeper.

"I thought no decision had been made about letting me live."

The guard smiled, then rumbled forth another laugh. "Rudy hasn't made that decision about me, yet." He pointed down the walk toward my old room. "Let's go."

II.

Before the guard closed the door, plunging the room into darkness again, a quick look around showed me a small rectangular alcove carved out of solid rock. In the darkness, I felt along the walls finding nothing but moon dust. The stuff was everywhere. Grey, fine, and adhesive, the powder seemed to be in everything. Stock joke earthside: moon miners get greylung. The joke had come back with the original miners that operated the first experimental mines on Luna. But that was before the Plague and before the miners had been replaced by thousands of carriers sentenced to Luna to separate them from the rest of the population. At first, the press had called Luna the new Molokai, then simply the leper colony: one hundred and forty thousand carriers of a novel lifeform product of late 1980's recombinant DNA research known as "Megabug." They were guarded and managed by five thousand immunes, or "munies." For three generations, the leper colony had mined the mountains between Imbrium and Serenitatis, feeding the seven mass drivers that provided raw materials for the New Eden industrial station; which, in turn, fed products to Earth. But, the carriers wanted to come back, and Terranism was born.

I put my back against the wall and slid down to a sitting posi-

tion. Rubbing my wrists, I thought back to my meeting with Vegler and Raymond. Why was I still alive? The Terranists had claimed responsibility for bombing the shuttle to El Five from Luna, a disaster that claimed the lives of fifteen young children among many others. Why would they spare my life simply because I'm innocent?

Voices again, outside the door. What use did they plan to make of me? I was no safe voice, but I certainly had no sympathy for the Terranists. The door unlatched, then opened, exposing Ahmis the guard. "Let's go, laddie."

"Where?" I pushed myself to my feet.

"It's time to fit you with some walking gear. Looks as though you'll be with us for a while."

III.

Endless hours later, clad in scavenged surface gear, a wide red band sprayed around my chest, I followed the doctor who patched up my head through a wide, low gallery lit by a single string of dim, green numbars. Even without being bound, I found movement difficult. To move forward in the clumsy gear, I had to lean forward as though I were trying to walk through a gale-force storm. To stop, I had to lean backwards and dig in. It took a few drifts to the floor of the gallery to polish my technique. The effort of getting back on my feet, as well as the strain of the bouncy pace we kept, soon mixed the acrid smell of the moon dust in the suit with my sweat, and the leftover smells of the previous occupant. Since my radio had been removed, the only sound I could hear were the circulation motor and my own breathing.

Ahead of the doctor, a string of Terranists made their way to the open end of the gallery. It opened on the dark side of a mountain, but sunlight from the slope opposite the entrance hurt my eyes. Behind, my faithful keeper Ahmis kept a close watch on me. He had chuckled as he showed me how to patch the holes in the suit's plastic lining with crosses of plastic tape. I had asked the cause of his humor, and he pointed out, in detail, how the suit was obtained from its previous occupant.

While she cleaned my wound and covered it with plastiskin, the doctor had remained silent. She bounced along in front of me, and came to a halt at the gallery entrance. Leaning backward and digging in, I managed not to run into her. Ahmis pulled up beside

me and we could all see a figure in front, outside the entrance, giving hand signals. In a few moments, the doctor started off and Ahmis and I followed. Behind us were, perhaps, ten others.

Outside the gallery, I saw that we were on one of the old access roads. The old mounting braces for the ore-belt supports could be seen every few meters, which meant that we were still in the Caucasus. Far in front, a six-wheeled ore extractor turned right off the road and headed down a large gully. Those in front turned and followed after. As we walked out of the mountain's shadow, I saw the rim of Calippus. It had to be. Calippus was the largest crater near the ore belt system, which meant we were far north of Bee Town. An hour or more later, we reached the end of the gully and gathered again. As I looked around, I could see thirty-two in surface suits. One of them mounted the ore extractor and entered the airlock. Soon after, the figure emerged and the extractor turned right again and headed off across the low rolling hills toward the darkness of the higher Caucasus west of Calippus. Those of us on foot turned left and headed south.

As my suit struggled to keep out the blistering heat, I began feeling dizzy. I kept up, but before I realized what was happening, the doctor had fallen back beside me and had plugged a black cord from her helmet into mine.

"How do you feel, Lambert?"

I laughed. "After getting my head beat in with rifle stocks, how do you expect me to feel?"

"Are you dizzy; a little sick to your stomach?"

"Yes."

She held up her hand and Ahmis stopped next to us. She pulled the air coupling from my pack and inserted it into a cup she pulled from a pouch at her belt. I could feel that no air was entering my system, and began to panic, but she soon plugged the coupling back in and my nostrils were assaulted with an new odor: something like rotted leaves mixed with some kind of commercial hand cream. "The feeling should be gone in an hour or so." She pulled the cord from my helmet and wound it up and attached it to her own. As she turned and followed the others, Ahmis tapped my shoulder and pointed after her. I leaned forward and followed.

I looked from the black sky to the Earth hanging huge over the horizon and wondered what purpose I was serving. One bouncing foot in front of the other, each one lifting that grey dust that settled quickly to the surface again. As I reached a slight rise I could see wheel prints in the dust extending off toward the golden tan

horizon. We followed the tracks for another hour or two until we reached the end of another abandoned access road. At that point, my dizziness had cleared up but the effort of walking with mostly unfamiliar muscles had my legs aching. Hand signals went up for a halt, and I turned to see how our passage had marked the Lunar surface, but no tracks could be seen. At the end of the column two figures with what looked like hockey sticks were erasing the evidence. The column moved again, then walked into the shadow of a cliff and stopped.

The doctor turned and connected the cord from her helmet to mine. "Is the dizziness gone?"

"Yes." She reached up her hand to pull the plug. "Wait. As long as we're stopped, could we talk for a while?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to ask a few questions." She reached up again to pull the cord. "Look, if you people want your side reported, you're going to have to talk to me."

She hesitated, then dropped her hand. "What do you want to know?"

I sighed, grateful to have someone to talk to. "Well, to begin, what's your name, doctor?"

"Kit."

"Kit what?"

"You'll find most of us use single names, usually adopted. We still have families in the pits." Her voice came through the speaker cold and brittle.

"What about Rudy Vegler?"

"The lockwatchers killed his family when he was just a boy, right after he joined the Terranist League."

"Why are you a Terranist?"

She gave a sharp laugh. "The same as everyone else, Lambert: to go back to Earth." She reached up, pulled the plug and turned away. More hand signals from up front, and the column moved out.

As we bounced down the road past dark, abandoned mine entrances, I thought of the Terranist goals and could almost understand. The novelty of being on Earth's moon had worn off tense hours ago, and seeing that blue-white globe hanging above the bleak, grey, airless mountains made me long for fresh air, trees, and water. To be able to stretch my naked arms in the sunlight, to splash into a clear pool, even to scratch when I felt like it, had become luxuries beyond price. It would seem even dearer to those

who have never been to Earth, and the band of cutthroats I'd seen were at least third, possibly fourth generation carriers. But they were carriers, and could never come home to Earth. The Terranists had no sympathy on Earth; to let them back on the planet meant certain death for at least four-fifths of the human race. I looked at the Great Lakes and took a sip of warm, tasteless water through the tube in my helmet.

As the column reached a sharp turn in the old access road, hand signals went up and we fled off the road back into the shadows. I looked up and saw a formation of four police fighters streak toward Calippus. We waited for a few moments, then were motioned back on the road. Ahead, five-wheeled vehicles turned right off the main road onto a track that led straight into the mountain. As I came abreast of the feeder road and turned, I saw it enter the opening of one of the countless abandoned mine shafts that dotted the base of the mountain.

Inside the shaft, we came to a gallery-wide airlock and stepped in, leaving the vehicles outside. After a few moments, I could feel the pressure of the chamber equalizing the pressure of my suit. Vegler, Ahmis, and the others removed their helmets, and I fooled with the lock on mine until it opened, allowing me to push my helmet back. Ahmis reached out a beefy hand and shut down my suit's systems.

Vegler turned to me. "All the gear we picked up at the news conference will be brought in. Identify yours and bring it with you. Ahmis will show you the way."

"Would it be a breach of security to ask why?"

"You're about to do your first story from the leper colony; that's what you're here for, isn't it?"

I ground my teeth a little—the ones that remained. "I said I'm not here to do puff pieces for the Terranist League. What makes you think I will?"

"Two things: first, it doesn't matter whether you approve or not, the Terranists exist and they are news. Or are you one of those safe voices you mentioned?"

"No." What could I do but agree; he was right. "What was the second thing?"

Vegler grinned. "With your mouth shut, you're no use to your station, the munies, or to us. You may as well be skinny dipping in the moon dust."

I nodded. Both points were well taken.

§ § §

IV.

Loaded with my equipment, Ahmis and I followed Vegler and three other Terranists through the dark shafts until we came to a section lit with numbars. The greenish light, dim and flickering, mixed with mournful, wailing voices. It took a moment to realize this was singing. We moved around a slight turn in the shaft and were waved on by a red-banded figure in the distance. Where the sentry stood, the shaft seemed to narrow to a single passageway almost two meters wide, but, as we came closer, I saw that the gallery walls had been filled in with rough-cut blocks.

I entered the passage behind Vegler and saw that the gallery had been divided into rooms, and in the rooms were people. Only a few steps into the mine shaft town, the smell of the ever present moon dust was overpowered by the smells of unwashed bodies, urine, and burnt grease. A very old woman, her legs missing from the knees down, sat in the passageway and reached out a hand toward Vegler as he passed. The Terranist stopped, squatted, and touched the old woman's cheek with the palm of his hand. She took his hand in hers, kissed it, then released it. Vegler watched as she nodded, smiled, and pulled herself into a dark doorway. He looked down at the dusty floor for a second, then stood and looked at me.

I pointed toward the dark doorway. "What was that, a Terranist groupie?" Vegler backhanded me across my face with the armored glove of his surface suit sending me sprawling into Ahmis, then onto the floor. He turned and stormed off. Ahmis grabbed my shoulder and pulled me to my feet. "What is she, his mother?"

Ahmis reached down and picked up my equipment, dumping it into my arms. "No. She's just an old woman."

"What happened to her legs?"

"Mine accident, like a lot of old people here."

A bit weavey on my feet, I stumbled off after Vegler. There were many dark doorways, and many old faces. The deeper we got into the area, the stronger became the smells. Ahead, Vegler turned into one of the doorways. Before entering, I stopped and faced Ahmis. "What is this place?"

"This is where you go when you're too old to work the mines. We call it the boneyard."

Ahmis pointed at the doorway, and I turned and entered. The dark room looked and smelled like all the others. Its single difference was a false wall where the hard rock of the gallery should

have been. Ahmis nodded toward it, and I stepped through into a black, narrow hall. Feeling along the rough walls with my fingertips, I made a turn and saw white light ahead. A few steps further and I entered a smooth-walled, white chamber with a low ceiling set with yellowish-white light panels. Along the far wall stood racks of weapons. On either side of the racks were closed doors and immediately in front of me were several metal chairs and a table. Vegler stood with his back toward me, talking to Kit and a frail old fellow dressed in coveralls. It took a moment, but I finally made the face. It was Charles Towne, the molecular biologist stationed with the Luna Immune contingent, kidnapped by the Terranists four years earlier and presumed dead.

Vegler cocked his head in my direction. "Towne, this is Lambert, the reporter I told you about."

Towne's watery blue eyes darted at me, then back to Vegler. "If I cooperate, then you'll release me?"

"We'll see." Vegler looked at me. "This is your show; how do you want to work it?"

I shrugged, then looked around the room. "I'll set my stuff up, then we'll just sit down and talk. . . . Will we be going someplace other than this room?"

"Perhaps."

"Then I may need someone to work the camera in transit."

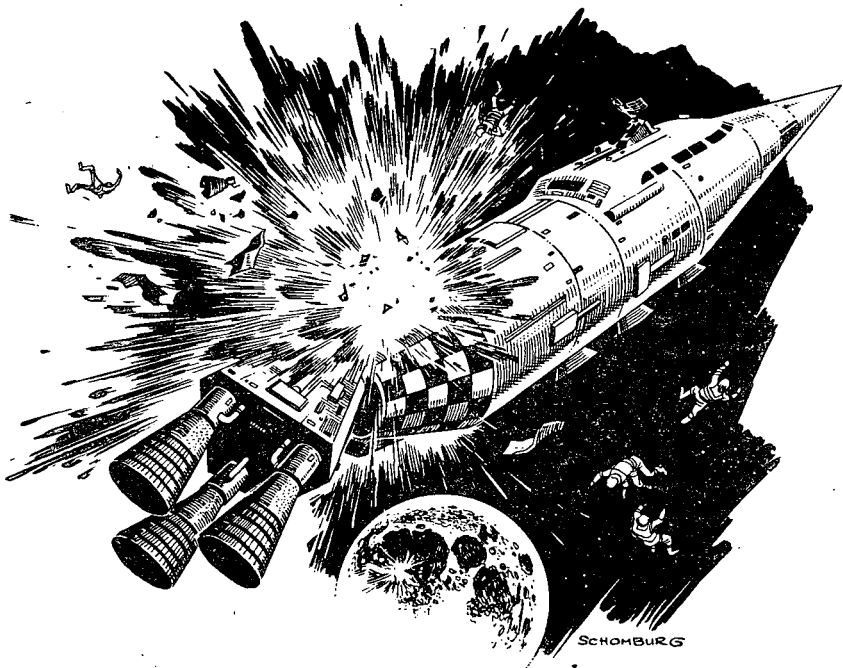
Vegler scratched his chin and looked at Ahmis standing next to me. The Terranist guard had his arms loaded with gear. "You feel like a camera jock, Ahmis?"

The guard grinned. "Sure, Rudy." Ahmis lowered the gear to the floor, removed the gloves to his surface suit and rubbed his hands together. "Where do we start, laddie?"

I raised an eyebrow at Vegler. He smiled and sat in one of the metal chairs. "Whenever you're ready, Lambert."

V.

Hours later, I sat in the room staring at the five-centimeter screen of my editor, trying to shake off the feeling that more had gone on at the interview than I had gotten on tape. I skipped over some experimenting Ahmis had done with the camera's zoom lens, checked the index and stopped, backed, then stopped again. I pushed the playback and watched a miniature representation of



Charles Towne rub his nose, then fold his arms.

"The Lunar Genetic Center was established in '91, immediately after the contained carrier population had been removed to the moon. The original purpose of the center was, in effect, to find a cure for the carriers."

Lambert. "You said 'original purpose.' The purpose changed then?"

Towne squirmed, looked off screen, then looked back at Lambert and nodded. "It was when the New Eden station at El Five was just beginning construction—before my time."

Lambert: "About 2005."

Towne: "Yes. Well, you see the Center had been examining both carriers and immunes on Luna on a regular basis. The nucleotide sequence that gave immunity to the so-called megabug had been identified. But, another thing was beginning to make itself evident: The particular strain of *E. Coli* that carried the recombined plasmids that were found to be pathogenic . . ."

Lambert: "The megabug."

Towne: "Yes. Well, the frequency of occurrence appeared to diminish as time passed. Samples on record show"

Lambert: "You mean the bug was dying out?"

Towne: "It did die out. No traces have been found since 2008."

Lambert: "You mean that the carrier population has been free of the disease since '08? They could be returned to Earth with no harmful effects?"

Towne nodded. "That's when the Center's purpose changed. By then, Luna had four mass drivers and the New Eden station was beginning to supply products to Earth. The mass drivers had to be fed, and it was decided to keep the news secret until they could be sure. All information concerning the so-called plague was collected and filed at the center."

Lambert: "And?"

Towne: "And that's where the situation stands today, sixty years later."

Vegler: "Except that now there are seven mass drivers to feed." The picture moved until Vegler's head filled the tiny screen.

Lambert: "What you're saying, then, is that the carrier population—actually, its descendents—are being used as . . . as"

Vegler: "'Slaves' is the word you're looking for."

Lambert: "For what possible reason?"

Vegler: "The original miners on Luna were well paid and their quarters and facilities were extravagant. You've seen Bee Town?"

Lambert: "Yes."

Vegler: "That was the original settlement, but now the immunes live there. The immunes pay us in food and minimal living conditions. They literally control the air we breathe. You've seen how we live; it's cheaper."

I pushed the stop and looked at Vegler's frozen face. If true, that would explain what the United States of Earth had to hide on Luna. But how much of Towne's statement could be trusted? Towne and Kit had taken me into another room, crammed with equipment and wire files. They showed me slides, documents, records, and other things the Terranists had snatched at the Center when they kidnapped Towne. But I couldn't judge what I'd seen. All of us had guns stuck in our ears. Even so, just finding Charles Towne alive would make the story, not to mention the followup potential in a story on carrier living conditions. If it was true that the bug had died, so much the better. It would be the coverup of

the century. Just thinking of the number of high officials and different administrations that must have been involved to pull it off made my mouth water. It was true; no one on Earth would lift a finger to help the carriers, even if the bug had died out sixty years before.

I went fast forward until I saw Vegler stabbing his finger at the air, then hit the play. "... like the Indians on the old reservations. They don't ask why they wound up on the reservations; all they can think of is that the government has been paying their upkeep. Why, then, should anyone give them back their land? That's what they think of us now. A planetoid full of welfare bums; why should we let them back on Earth? We do that, and the next thing you know, they'll want their properties back."

Lambert: "Will terrorism turn that indifference into sympathy?"

Vegler shook his head. "No. But we're not looking for sympathy."

Lambert: "What, then?"

Vegler: "Action."

Lambert: "You are, of course, aware that the few Terranist apologists on Earth have made the claim that the present containment of carriers is based on a hoax. It's regarded as nothing but Terranist propaganda."

Vegler: "Those pictures in your school books, the streets choked with black, rotting corpses, won't be countered by words alone. Before, you asked what we hoped to accomplish by bombing the shuttle to El Five. It's simple. We're giving them new pictures of horror to counter the old. If we make them horrible enough, we'll get the action we seek. . . ."

I hit the stop. But then, if words won't do it, why go to all the trouble of keeping me alive to conduct an interview? That's what was bothering me. The edited tape loop had been packed in the shielded case, and the case given to a party to put in one of the mass drivers. They could just ditch the case, but what would be the point? They could have accomplished the same thing just by killing me at the news conference. I feather-touched the back button and hit the play.

"... new pictures of horror to counter the old. If we make them horrible enough . . ." I hit the stop, ejected the tape and picked the first tape off the table, feeling sick to my stomach. I hit the fast forward and watched the miniature figures jerk about until the one named Kit sat still for a moment, looking at the one called Mark Lambert. Stop. Back. Play.

Lambert: "... seems to me, that with the training and equipment you and Towne need to do the checks on the carriers, and to understand all this, you ought to be able to do your own recombinant DNA work."

Kit: "Such as?"

Lambert: "Well, on Earth the research has many applications in food production, medicines—things that could improve conditions up here."

Kit looked at Towne, then leveled her eyes at Lambert, a hint of a smile on her lips. "We've done a little of that, yes. . . ." I hit the stop and turned off the editor.

I just bet they'd done a little of that. "... new pictures of horror. . . ." The tape container would be picked up from the dirt track, taken to the New Eden station and opened, releasing . . . what? Two and a half million men, women, and children were at New Eden. I felt my skin prickle as I realized that cargo and passenger shuttles to Earth left New Eden in a steady stream. The Earth . . .

Kit entered the room from the door to the right of the rifle racks, looked at my face and smiled. "It looks as though you figured it out." She raised a rifle and pointed it at me. All I could do was sit there with my mouth hanging open. I looked at the floor and examined the equipment there. The signal coder by which I would know when the pickup had been accomplished was gone. If I had it, I could signal the pickup ship to abort. I looked at Kit. "Rudy has it."

"Where is he? You don't understand; I've got to stop him!"

She laughed. "If I wouldn't understand, who would?"

"You don't know what you're doing!"

She waved the muzzle of her rifle at me. "Stay seated and stay alive, Lambert. . . ." Before she could finish, I reached under the table and turned it over on her. The edge of the table deflected her rifle toward the ceiling. She fired, the rifle's blinding white beam blowing rocks and rock powder down on both of us. Without stopping, I ran across the overturned table, then kicked her in the side of her head. I picked up the rifle and a helmet sitting on one of the chairs. I seated the helmet in place as I headed toward the door, wondering why the helmet locks were so easy to work. I had taken my gloves off to work the editor. I went back for them, clipped them into the suit's cuffs and bounced down the dark passage, turned and came to the false wall. It was a sliding slab of rock, perhaps as thick as ten centimeters. I could see a crack of light

along one edge, but couldn't find a lock. I pushed on the slab, trying to move it, but it didn't even shake.

Unslinging the rifle, I aimed it at the crack and fired. The slab shattered diagonally, opening the upper part of the entrance. Ahmis's surprised face stared back at me. Jumping through the opening, I slammed the stock of my rifle into his face and ran over him into the passage. Faces, up and down the passage, were sticking out of dark doorways.

I turned left and bounced back the way I had been led in. Where the shaft opened, I looked for the guard, but he was gone. I stepped out into the open part and a rifle bolt flashed over my head from behind me. I turned and saw Ahmis, blood running from his nose, bounding down the passage. I lifted my rifle, but there were too many others in the passage behind him. I turned and ran, stopping when I reached the slight turn in the shaft. As Ahmis came through the opening, I fired several times, filling the shaft at his end with moon dust.

I knew I had missed him as I turned and bounded off into the unlit shaft ahead. In moments, I was at the large airlock. I checked my suit's systems, closed the face plate, opened the door and stepped in. At the other end of the lock, I felt for the valve set in the door, found it and turned it wide open. In a few moments my suit was tight and I undogged the outside door and opened it. It was weighted to close automatically behind me to make the cell operational for the next person wanting out. Since that next person was going to be Ahmis, I picked up a fist-sized stone and jammed it in the closing door. It held.

One of the wheeled vehicles along the side of the gallery was missing. I climbed up on the next and lowered myself into the tubular-frame driver's seat and studied the few controls. It was a simple cargo rover with little more than a charge indicator, throttle, brake, and steering wheel. I moved the throttle to the reverse position and the rover jerked to life and swayed out of the shaft entrance. The road was wide at the entrance and I backed around, turned the wire mesh wheels downhill, and gave it forward throttle.

In moments I reached the main access road, then stopped, wondering where to go next. To the left I knew the road just ended, but Vegler and company might have gone that way to avoid the security police. But—however they went, they'd have to wind up at the mass drivers, and that's where the old ore belt access roads went. I turned right and gave the rover full throttle forward.

The road went straight, until it ran into a tee where two old ore belt routes joined. The mass drivers were south of Calippus. I turned right, held on for dear life around a curve and stopped just in time to miss an ore extractor making its way across the road. Behind it, raised on metal frame supports every few meters, was the beginning of the ore belt system in use. From the mountain rising to my right, smaller belts led from gallery entrances to dump their loads onto the main belt.

I swung around the ore extractor and followed the access road in and out of the forest of ore belt supports. To my left, the emptiness of Serenitatis made me stop and think. As the rover came to a halt, I tried to visualize the layout of the mass drivers and ore belt system. The drivers were at the edge of the *mare*, directly south of the eastern Caucasus, which is where I had to be if I could see Serenitatis. When the road turned to the right to follow the line of the mountains, I turned off the road and continued south.

In minutes I was lost. All landmarks had dropped below the short horizon and my only directional aids were the rover tracks stretching out behind me. Although not much help to me, they would be invaluable to Ahmis as he rolled down the access road and saw the tracks running off across Serenitatis pointing a big red arrow at my back. I leaned forward to put full throttle to the rover, but found it already at maximum. The charge indicator showed negative, and in bright sunlight. I pulled up, stood and stepped on the seat to check the solar cell panel. There must have been a centimeter of moon dust on it. I brushed off what I could with my arm and turned to step down off the seat. In the distance, a flash of silver followed by another announced the mass driver complex.

I quickly checked back the way I had come, but Ahmis was nowhere in sight. My stunt at the airlock must have worked. I dropped into the seat, hit the throttle, and headed toward where I remembered the glint of silver. The charge indicator was still negative, but less so. In a moment, it didn't matter. As I reached a slight rise, the kilometers of gleaming bars and whizzing buckets of the mass driver complex stretched out right to left, from horizon to horizon. The buckets scooped up a load at the slow end dump, then were propelled by synchronized magnetic pulses along the length of the tracks until they reached escape velocity. At the fast end, the buckets opened, shooting the compacted ore into the dirt track orbit where the catcher station gathered it up. The

buckets were decelerated and returned to the slow end for another pickup. The buckets I could see were slowing from left to right, and I turned right toward the slow end.

The rover lurched and bounced around a small, house-sized crater, then up a steep hill. From the crest I could see the cargo rover Vegler and his group had taken next to three rovers mounted with environmental support vans bearing the insignia of the security police. Behind them rose the long, tapered bin of the dump being fed by two huge ore trunk belts. A flash from one of the police rovers kicked up the dust in front of me and I turned left and headed for the dark safety of the spaces underneath the mass driver tracks. More flashes and it seemed as though I was caught in a dust storm. The dust cleared, and I realized the rover wasn't moving. The two wire mesh tires on the right side looked like aluminium spaghetti. I jumped off the left side and bounded for the driver tracks.

As I approached the tracks, bringing my attention with me in the form of police fire, answering fire aimed at the police vans began coming from under the tracks. A red banded figure stood out from behind a support and waved me on. When I was within five meters of the shadows, I was lifted from behind, slammed into one of the inside track supports, then buried in moon dust.

My head swam and I drifted in and out of consciousness as I felt hands digging me out. My body felt like a sack of broken glass. Gloved fingers wiping the dust off my face plate; Vegler's face looking back at me. He pulled a black cord from his helmet and plugged it into mine.

"Lambert?"

"You monster," I hissed. "Where is the case?"

A beam flashed behind Vegler's helmet, but he didn't seem to notice. "It's gone. Who told you, or did you figure it out?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"Lambert, the lockwatchers will be on us in a few seconds. You answer me now, or I'll fry a hole through your head."

"That seems to be the Terranist answer to everything; can't get an answer, fry a hole in somebody's head. Can't go back to Earth, wipe out the damned human race. . . ."

"Shut up and listen. What's in that case is something that will make megabug look like a case of diaper rash by comparison. . . ."

"That should get some attention, Vegler. . . ."

"You're damned right it will! But, there's something else. The

bug Kit and Doc Towne cooked up takes from two to four months to kill, and no one on Earth knows a cure for it. Even if they did, it would take them two or three months to begin production. . . ."

"My god, Vegler . . ."

"Listen. We have a cure; another organism that can compete successfully with the first. We have enough of it stashed away in abandoned mine shafts right now to immunize everyone on Earth. When we go back to Earth, we'll bring it with us."

"Blackmail."

"Yes. You have a better solution?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Lambert, we need time—eight or ten days for the organism to spread. If they know what's going on, they'll be able to contain it at the New Eden station. . . ."

I laughed, then stopped as I felt the loose ends of a couple of ribs grind together. "What is it, Vegler? You want me to keep my mouth shut, is that it?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you just shut it?"

Vegler seemed to have the same look on his face that he had when he touched the old woman's cheek back in the boneyard. "I don't want to kill you, Lambert. Someday, when it's a time for law again, we'll need people with your naïve abhorrence of violence."

"How do you expect me to keep quiet? My god, even if they do finally agree, you know how long that would take? You know how slowly governments work."

"Why should we be the only ones who have to pay for the government's inertia?"

Breathing came very hard. Someone ran by Vegler and tapped him on the helmet as he passed. "Vegler, how do I know you have a cure? . . ." Pieces of rock showered down on us. The lockwatchers were closing in.

"Kit—" Vegler teetered, then fell over on top of me. "On the road—" A loud ringing in my helmet, we were both lifted up, then slammed hard.

VI.

I opened my eyes, the memory of rotted leaves and hand cream

still in my nostrils. I felt ill and Kit had taken my air hose. . . . But, was that proof? The white haze in front of my eyes swam, then shaped itself into a face. "Lambert?"

"Who are you?" I whispered.

The face turned. "Captain, I think he can talk now."

The first face left and another took its place. "I'm Captain Manion, Lambert. It's a real stroke you made it alive. The Terranists usually aren't that careless."

"Manion? Are you with the police?"

"Yes. I hate to question you now, but I have no other choice. What were they doing at the mass drivers? They know that if they mess with the drivers, we'll cut the air off to one of the residential galleries."

"Cut the air?"

"Yes. It sounds harsh, but we have to protect the drivers. Both Earth and the New Eden station depend on them." Manion must have seen the look on my face. "We wouldn't do it to production workers or anything vital; just one of the boneyards. You know, they're only carriers." He turned away and came back holding a small red plastic box. It was the signal coder and the pickup light was still off. The case was still in the dirt track. "You know what this is?"

I looked at the ten numbered keys. All I had to do was punch in four-four-three and the pickup would be aborted. That's all. "I don't know, Captain. It looks like a pocket calculator."

Manion raised his eyebrows and shrugged, then turned to the other one. "All right, doctor, you can have him back." He left the compartment. It lurched; we were in a police van.

The doctor's face swam into view. "Sorry we can't get you back to Earth right away, Lambert, but you're pretty banged up. We'll probably keep you for two weeks or so."

I closed my eyes. "That should be time enough."

"Enough for what?"

I opened my eyes and looked at the doctor. "The Terranists are planning an announcement about then."

"Oh?" The doctor peered at a plastic sack filled with clear liquid that drained from a tube into my arm. "More demands?"

I bit my lip and closed my eyes to force back the tears. "It's a surprise." Vegler at the interview: *"There are no innocents, Lambert. If because you do nothing, nothing is done, you are guilty. There is a time for terror. Perhaps you will come to understand this. . . ."* I laughed. "Where's Rudy Vegler?"

The doctor nodded toward the back of the compartment. Stacked like cordwood, the five Terranists, still in their torn, filthy, blood-caked surface suits, jiggled with the motion of the police rover across the Lunar landscape. On the bottom, nearest me, Rudy Vegler stared at me through a shattered faceplate with empty sockets. His skin was purple—almost black. "We got all of them."

I looked back at the doctor. "Not all. There's still a few left."

The doctor shrugged. "Ten or fifteen? Might as well be all. How can a dozen fanatics fight the entire world?" The doctor patted my arm, turned and left the compartment.

"As I said, doctor, it's a surprise." My voice sounded tinny in the empty compartment. The tears began to flow freely and I turned my head toward the pile of dead Terranists. "Damn you. Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

A SECOND SOLUTION TO THE THREE ROBOTS OF PROFESSOR TINKER

(from page 85)

Ask the robot on the left, "Is it true that the middle robot is the liar or the robot on the right is the truther?" The chart below shows the possible answers for each of the six permutations:

	Left	Middle	Right	Yes	No
1.	T	L	S	X	
2.	T	S	L		X
3.	L	T	S	X	
4.	L	S	T		X
5.	S	T	L	X	X
6.	S	L	T	X	X

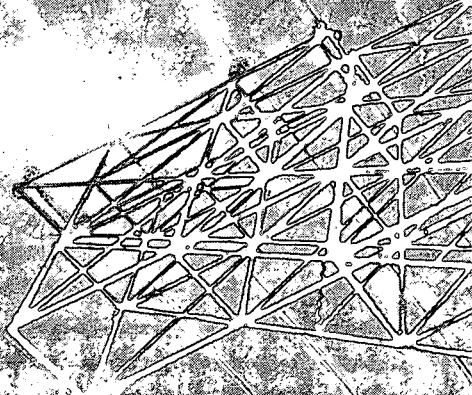
As you can see from the chart, if the robot says yes, the middle robot must be a truther or a liar. If the robot says no, the robot on the right must be a truther or a liar.

If the answer is yes, say to the middle robot: "If I were to ask you if the lady with the necklace is the oldest, would you say yes?" Assume the girl with the necklace is indeed the oldest. The truther will say yes and so will the liar! (The liar would have answered no to the first part of the question, so she must lie and say yes to Isomorph's entire question.) By similar reasoning, if the girl with the necklace is *not* the oldest, both the truther and the liar will say no. Therefore the second question is sufficient to decide if the girl with the necklace is the oldest.

If the robot on the left answers no to the first question, then the robot on the right must be either a truther or liar. The second question is then directed to her, with the same result.

"I just thought of a better solution to your first problem," said Isomorph. "I can learn the identity of all three girls, no matter how they sit, by asking just *two* questions."

What does Isomorph have in mind? His solution is on page 187.



AGAINST A CROOKED STILE

by Nancy Kress

art: Karl B. Kofoed



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Ms. Kress's first appearance in our
magazine was her "A Delicate
Shade of Kipney" in our Jan/Feb 1978 issue.*

Down under the new cast, somewhere near the immobile crook of his elbow, Jorry's arm itched. Surreptitiously he tried to fidget his cramped muscles against the inside of the heavy plaster, but the itchy prickling only grew worse, and the sudden pain that shot through his broken elbow was sharp enough to bring tears to his eyes. Quickly, before his father could notice, Jorry raised his eyes and gazed across the heat-shimmered field, trying to make it look as though the tears had come from staring unblinkingly into the sun. Neither of the two men facing each other in the thigh-deep, uncut hay noticed him.

"Two days," his father growled in his heavy, rusty voice, a voice that scraped across the words like an unused file. Tiny drops of perspiration rolled from the black eyebrows that were joined in a single fierce line, and down onto the bridge of his nose. Jorry took a step backward, away from them both.

"Two days she just sat there, now. Hay only halfways cut, burning up in this sun—who's gonna cut it?" He spat, the spittle sticking to a stalk of hay in a wet glob. "Not me. So you just tell me that, you that's got all the answers—who's gonna get up on that there death trap and cut the hay before the crop's lost for good?"

The power-company man gazed at the tractor squatting in the middle of the field. Sunlight reflected blindingly off the tarnished yellow metal, and he put up one plump, pale hand to shield his eyes. Bits of hay clung to his dark suit where it bulged outward at the waist.

"But I've told you several times, Mr. Whitfield, there's no danger now that we've grounded the machinery and the other—"

"I know what you told me. I heard you." Whitfield spat again and the stranger hopped back a little, glancing down at his shoes. "You come in here and put chains on my barn and my tractor and even on my boy's swing. and that's supposed to fix ev'rything, trade it all out nice and even. It don't, mister. Not by a goddam sight. How'd you like to be the one who—"

"Look, Whitfield," the stranger said. He leaned forward a little,

and Jorry saw a hard line of bone suddenly jut forward under his soft jowls, as unexpected as the teeth in the pink baby possums Jorry had once found in the woods. The boy almost whimpered, but caught himself: trading silence for not being noticed.

"I've spent all the time here that this situation calls for. Minor shocks such as you experienced are common near 1,000 kV lines; we get 'em all the time. But if conducting objects near the right of way are properly grounded, there's no danger. No one has ever demonstrated—"

"Now see here, you can't—"

"—*ever* demonstrated, I said, harmful effects from exposure to electrostatic fields—"

"I'll sue you bastards for—"

"—of *any* strength; and, believe me, the power company will dismiss your threats of a court suit with nothing more than 'exposure' to trade on as so much nonsense. Have I made our position clear to you? Because I've heard all I intend to!"

Whitfield took a step forward, his fists clenched at his sides. The stranger stood his ground squarely; and suddenly it seemed to Jorry that the man grew as tall and black as the line towers themselves, thrusting darkly 150 feet above the baking field, like menacing giants stalking the sky. In sudden terror Jorry moved to jerk his right arm up to cover his face, but the sling held the cast immobile and pain again tore through the shattered elbow.

Giants—

"All you're going to hear, eh?" his father was shouting. "You think so? Well, listen a goddamn minute to *that*!" He thrust a trembling arm backward.

Caught off guard, the stranger blinked stupidly in the fierce sunlight before turning and looking over the hay. The scrubby pine at the edge of the field seemed to waver a little in the blanket of heat, but the girders of black metal slicing the sky above it were etched hard and clear. For a moment the two men were still, bent slightly forward, straining to listen. Over the drone of summer insects came a low crackling hum, fitful and unceasing, punctuated with an occasional louder snap that fizzled out slowly. The sound was insistent, edgy, like the mutter of buried embers under a banked fire.

"And that's prett' near 400 feet away," Whitfield said grimly. "You walk closer with a fluorescent light from the bathroom, the bulb lights up. I know. I did it myself." Suddenly he shivered, a quick unexpected spasm shaking his thick body but not rippling

the stained denim overalls covering it. "And I ain't gonna do it again. You say that's not dangerous?"

"I do," the stranger said. His intent stare had vanished; and now he appeared bored, amused, and impatient. "People are not light bulbs. I'll find my own way back to the car."

A few steps into the uncut hay, however, he stopped, paused, and then turned with obvious reluctance, his plump face annoyed. "Uh... just one more thing, Whitfield. You don't wear a pacemaker, do you? From heart surgery? The company is... uh... advising all residents with the demand-type cardiac pacemakers to remain outside the right of way. Purely as a precautionary measure."

Before Whitfield could answer, the stranger turned again and hurried across the field, the stalks closing behind him with a soft swish. Jorry took another step backward, his eyes too big as he watched his father's face go from red to a dull mottled purple. Jagged red lines sprang out around the nose and mouth. Holding his breath, unable to move, the boy cowered dumbly in the tall hay, waiting

—the belt falling and he threw up his arms to shield—
for the moment his father would turn and the fierce blue eyes with their watery, red-lined whites would fall on him, fall on him and then...

But Whitfield didn't turn around. He kept staring across the hay at the dwindling black spot that was the power-company man, and slowly his hands curled into fists. Behind him the line crackled in the empty hot sky.

If you lay with your eyes half-closed, Jorry thought, and sort of squinted up the left one, you could make the clouds change shape even faster than the wind could. If you squinted up both eyes, the shapes dissolved and ran together and you could start all over again, make a new world all over again. . . .

Lying on his back with the shoulder-to-knuckle cast propped up on his stomach, breathing in the dry warm smell of the Sandersons' hay, Jorry made shapes out of clouds. The Sanderson farm joined the Whitfields', but was much larger; and in its back field already dense with the second hay crop of the summer, Jorry was seldom disturbed. He had left off the sling because he couldn't figure out how to tie it around his neck with only one hand; the laces on his dirty blue sneakers were untied for the same reason. A grasshopper bounded onto the cast, watched the

boy from shiny multi-faceted eyes, and leaped off again. Jorry didn't stir.

Small shapes, that's what you wanted—nothing too large, nothing too dangerous. Rabbits, and marbles, and over there one of those fluffy white dogs, the kind that looked like a mop, like old Mrs. Reynolds used to have with all that shaggy hair all over its—

"You're scaring the mice," a voice said above him.

Jorry's eyes flew open and he scrambled to his feet, already backing away, hastily cradling the cast in his good arm. The flapping sneaker laces tangled in the hay and he pitched forward, throwing up his

—arm to shield his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and—

"Hey," the voice said. "There, I've got you—take it easy, fella. Hey, it's O.K.—I'm not rabid. Really. Haven't been for years."

Caught by his shoulders, Jorry stopped struggling and tried desperately to blink away his panicky tears and get a clear look at his captor. The man wavered, watery at the edges and streaked with blurred silver, then came into focus as the pain in Jorry's elbow subsided and the tears rolled out of his eyes and down his thin cheeks.

The man was wearing jeans, a blue cotton work shirt, and boots—a new hand at the Sandersons', then. But no—the jeans were patched and clean, not whole and dirty, and there were no traces of manure on the boots. So not a farm hand. His leather belt was foreign-looking, intricately worked, with some sort of silver buckle

—coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before—
shaped like the sun.

"Hey, I'm sorry," the man said, releasing Jorry's shoulders. "I didn't mean to scare you. You all right? I just wanted to ask you if you'd mind moving, because you're scaring the mice. That's all."

Jorry wrenched his eyes upward from the buckle, and then it was better. Above an untidy beard were good eyes, warm and young and brown, the color of fresh toast. Some of Jorry's panic ebbed, sliding away in long slow waves; and he sniffed and swiped at his nose with his good hand.

"What mice?"

The man rocked back and squatted on his heels. "Up there—under the line. You're upwind of them, and they smell you. Makes

'em jumpy. Jumpier."

Jorry craned his neck; he couldn't see over the low ridge swelling with half-grown hay.

"Come on up and look," the man said, and started off in such an off-hand matter that after a moment Jorry found himself following.

Under the line, on the uneven stubble of weeds that had remained after the power company had mowed its right-of-way, was a jumble of equipment. Four large glass boxes, elevated on wooden blocks and screened on two sides with plastic mesh, held piles of shredded newspaper full of burrowing mice. Two of the glass boxes were surrounded by a double shell of parallel wires, one inside the other, which were joined together and anchored firmly into the ground. Squares of metal standing on edge and facing each other in pairs had been placed on the grass, or on high poles. The metal squares had been hooked up to odd-looking meters and to dials that looked to Jorry like plastic warts. Parked over the ridge was a small, sturdy red truck near the remains of a ham sandwich already being carried away by the boldest of a watchful flock of crows. On the warm air rode the nose-wrinkling smell of mice.

"What's that?" Jorry asked, in spite of himself. "Around the mice?"

"Faraday cages," the man said promptly. "Keep the mice in that box from being exposed to the electrostatic field from the line."

Involuntarily Jorry glanced upward. The cable above him stretched like a long black road, a road curving and diminishing over the far horizon. A road for giants . . .

"What about these other mice?"

"They're exposed to the field. The idea is to see if they behave any differently after a long while near the line." Slowly, his brown eyes never leaving Jorry's face, he came around the boxes of mice and held out his hand. "My name's Tom Crowell."

Jorry took a step backward. "You from the power company?"

"No—no, I'm not." He lowered his empty hand. "I work for the Environmental Study Association. We want to see if these new 1,000 kV lines affect the wildlife hereabouts. Want to hold one of the mice, son?"

"I can't," Jorry mumbled, looking down at his untied sneakers. He could feel the back of his neck growing hot. "'Cause of my arm."

"I broke my arm once," Tom said cheerfully. "Healed clean as a

whistle. Before the cast came off, I'd collected the autographs of the whole fifth grade." He glanced at Jorry's cast, bare except for a rubbed-in catsup stain. "'Course, school's out just now. What's your name, son?"

"Jorry."

"Well, Jorry, I've seen you before, walking in the fields. You're about the only kid that *does* come up here. You interested in electronics? Is that why you like it here?"

Jorry kept his eyes fastened on a glass box behind a Faraday cage. Two bright eyes peered out from beneath a pile of shredded Sunday comics. Finally, as though it were an answer, he said, "My pa doesn't like the line."

"And who's your pa?"

"Clayte Whitfield."

"Oh," Tom said. "Oh—yes." He looked at the boy more closely, a sudden sharpness in his brown eyes. "He know you're up here, Jorry?"

Jorry traced a circle on the grass with the toe of his sneaker. "Pa never comes up here." After a long pause he added reluctantly, "He says the line's dangerous."

"Well, he's probably right," Tom said. The boy looked up quickly, his eyes wide with astonishment in his hollowed face.

"There's enough of a field up here to cause all sorts of body currents in a human being and set off God-knows-what trigger phenomenon—especially in the brain organelles. Not to even mention the geophysical effects. Just smell the air—go ahead, move away from the mice and take a deep breath."

Jorry had been going to ask what brain organelles and trigger fins on men were, but instead he obediently moved away from the glass boxes and sniffed. The air smelled faintly acrid, a dry elusive odor that reminded him vaguely of freshly-ironed cotton.

"Ozone," Tom said. "If we get a storm, you watch the line during the thunder, Jorry. It'll glow reddish-blue."

Again Jorry glanced at the huge metal towers. Giants . . .

"But, Mr. Crowell, if—"

"Tom."

"Well—Tom." He stumbled over the name, not used to this freedom. "If you think the line's so dangerous, why are you up here? Why aren't you joined up with the folk who stay away and want the line tore down and write letters and talk about . . ." Jorry trailed off. Talk? Talk was cheap, Pa said, and Jorry had watched while Pa carried in the tightly-sealed box from the

County Agricultural Agency, the box that was so heavy in the big hands that trembled all the time now except when they held the bottle steady to pour . . .

"Why am I up here?" Tom was saying. "Because I *think* the line's dangerous, but I don't *know*. Do you know where the line comes from, Jorry?"

He shook his head. No one ever said; they just wanted it gone.

"From the lignite coal mines up north. Energy is a valuable thing for everyone, Jorry, although not if the cost is too high in other valuable things. You have to weigh both sides, make the best trade-off. The people here want the line down because it's a scary unknown. But I think it's a better idea to get to *know* it, and then decide. What do you think?"

Jorry shook his head, embarrassed again. That wasn't the sort of thing adults asked him, except in school; and even then they didn't talk to him the way this Tom did. It didn't seem right, somehow. Not fitting. He was only Jorry Whitfield, Clayte Whitfield's kid, and everybody knew the Whitfield farm hadn't had a decent cash crop in three years, couldn't even bring much produce to town to trade anymore. And you had to trade for things; Jorry knew; even this Tom talked about the line as a trade-off. You didn't get things for free. Not hay, not chicken feed, not canned stew, not friendship.

"I got to go," he said abruptly.

"O.K.," Tom said. "But it was nice talking to you. Come back if you feel like it."

Jorry started home without answering. Pa might be back from town, might be looking for him. It was bad to be in the house when Pa came in, but worse not to be.

Moving slowly so his untied shoelaces wouldn't tangle in the hay, the boy trudged through the green stalks, holding the plaster cast close to his body. He took a long oblique route that kept him downwind of the mice.

But he went back, again and again, first hanging around the edges of the mowed stubble, observing as Tom worked and puttered and whistled off-key, then later moving in closer. Each time he came he brought something: a handful of chives from the plant that came up each year behind the barn, some wild strawberries from the hill by the creek, a sharpened pencil in case Tom lost his. Tom accepted these offerings gravely, putting the chives in his sandwich and the pencil in his shirt pocket, so Jorry felt it

was all right for him to stay. He helped, too, whenever he could. He fed the mice, careful to measure each cupful with painstaking exactness, adding and removing single pellets until he was sure each cage received the same amount. After a while Jorry got used to Tom's talking to him as if they were friends; sometimes he pretended to himself that they were. Jorry seldom said anything, but Tom talked all the time: talk poured out of him as relentlessly as sunshine, as unceasing as the crackle of the line. Jorry, unused to such talk, listened to all of it with cloistered intensity, his head bent forward, watching Tom through the sideways fall of his untrimmed bangs.

"The thing is, Jorry, that electrostatic fields set up currents between different parts of your body. There you are, Jorry Whitfield, a real live wire."

"You, too," Jorry said, astonishing himself. Tom leaped into the air, thrusting out his arms, legs, and tongue in a frenzied parody of every cartoon animal that ever stuck its finger in an electric socket on Saturday morning tv. The mice scuttled for cover.

"So the question is—what do all these currents *do*, coursing through the body beautiful?"

"What?" Jorry asked breathlessly.

Tom shrugged and dropped to the ground. "Dunno. Nobody knows."

Jorry stared at him a fraction of a second before again ducking his head. His hair fell forward over his face.

"We can guess, though. We can guess that it's probably affecting the brain, because brain organelles are most sensitive to voltage differences. And the brain is where perception takes place, where you experience things, so perception's a likely candidate for residual effects. You notice yourself seeing the grass blue, Jorry, or pink?"

Jorry frowned. The grass looked the same as usual to him, a dusty green fading to brown under the hot sun.

"Ah, well," Tom said, "Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was Goodyear Rubber. Did you know that Goodyear—the first Goodyear, I can't think of his name—that he discovered how to vulcanize rubber by accident, while he was cooking some sulphur gunk on the stove? Fact. You just never know what you'll get with science. The whole thing might just as easily have exploded in his face. But it didn't."

Jorry hadn't known. Sometimes it seemed to him that he didn't know anything, hadn't ever thought about anything except how to

stay out of people's way, until the coming of the line, and Tom. Now at night he lay awake in bed, listening to the shutter that had been banging in the wind for over a year now, and thought about their talks. Each remembered word became a smooth stone to turn over and over, running his thumb over the texture and curves of the surface, squinting at the hidden lines. At such times he always had a picture of Tom standing gigantic against a clear empty sky. In his picture, Tom was still talking.

There was a daily period, however, when they both sat silent and observed the mice for an uninterrupted hour, while Tom made notes in a large black folder. First he removed most of the shredded newspaper, and even the mice behind the wire Faraday cages could be seen clearly. As the weeks slipped by, it seemed to Jorry that the mice were increasingly jumpy and nervous, nipping at each other or fidgeting along the mesh, then dropping into periods of sudden sleep. He wondered what was going on in their brain organelles (he knew, now, what the words meant). Sometimes he touched his own head with one questing finger. It just felt like his head.

The weather turned rainy, a warm, off-again on-again drizzle. Weeds grew lush and green in the vegetable garden, choking the feathery carrots and the string beans straggling up their sagging poles. Jorry tried to fix the bean poles, but the wood was old and rotten, and he couldn't find the key to the storeroom where there may or may not have been fresh lumber. The uncut hay in the back field gave off the pungent smell of decay. As his father spent more and more time in town, Jorry slacked off on his chores, unable to find the needed supplies or equipment. He took care, however, to keep the few animals fed; when the chicken feed ran out, he gave the hens popcorn and Rice Krispies. They seemed to like it just as well.

The reduced chores gave him more time to hunt for things to take to Tom, necessary things, things that would earn him the right to visit the site under the line. He brought fresh eggs—Pa had stopped keeping egg tally—wild sumac for tea, blackberries, an Indian arrowhead, a four-leaf clover ironed between two sheets of waxed paper so it wouldn't shrivel up. Tom made a face when he tasted the sumac tea, but he carefully put the four-leaf clover in his wallet, on top of his health insurance card.

They observed the mice from under a leaky tarp rigged like a lean-to, and Tom shielded his notebook with an old plastic bag

labeled "Marino's work shirts." Rain dripped off his beard into his coffee cup.

"Ah, well, it's still not as messy as reading chicken entrails," Tom said as he wiped the rain off his thermos before pouring them more coffee. No one else had offered Jorry coffee. "Although sometimes Dame Science seems just as capricious as the rest of that Olympian crew about bestowing her mixed offerings and benedictions. Still, you have to be ready, in case she spreads her wings and get's generous." Jorry looked bewildered and Tom laughed.

"I mean that science gives both benefits, like tractors and medicine and this remarkable-unbreakable-new-improved-temperature-controlled thermos, and also problems, such as the power line. Starting off with a first step, you never really know what you'll end up with. Surprise, folks! A cosmic poker game, new deals hourly, step right in and play!"

"Like Charles Goodyear," Jorry said. Tom stared at him, surprised, and Jorry added in a sudden rush, "I'm gonna be a scientist, too, when I grow up, and discover important things like rubber." He reddened and ducked his head.

"Where'd you learn Goodyear's first name?" Tom asked. Jorry didn't answer. One day when Pa had inexplicably ordered him to ride to town in the truck, and then just as inexplicably forgotten all about him when they got there, Jorry had slunk into the library and read what he could about the vulcanization of rubber, puzzling over the unfamiliar words until footsteps approached and he had fled before any librarian could demand payment in the form of his non-existent library card.

Tom sipped his coffee. "I do hope you get to be a scientist, Jorry," he said gently. "I really do. Tell me—you ever have a dog?"

The boy shook his head and dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee.

"Well, I did. A black Labrador retriever. Used to show her. I remember talking once to a farmer about a dog that had gone wild, up north this was, and was killing chickens. It might have been part coyote. Anyway, the farmer was determined to shoot it, and took to hanging around the farmhouse with his rifle all loaded; but the dog always slipped by him, time after time. It got to be an obsession with the guy. He took to neglecting his farm, ignoring his family. All sorts of financial and legal tangles developed, about mortgages and such, and then about bad checks

and diseased stock—and the guy blamed it all on the dog killing those chickens. Just an excuse, of course—and a pretty shoddy one. Some men aren't afraid of anything except their mirrors."

He looked at Jorry with a sudden intensity, his eyes sharp and kind over the red plastic rim of the thermos cup, and Jorry wriggled his feet in embarrassment. Often he had the hazy impression that Tom was trying to tell him something, offer him something, in the same way he offered him the coffee. Why should a grown man be afraid of a mirror?

Just now, however, Jorry had something that needed saying. Carefully he kept his eyes on the generous amount of artificial cream dissolving in swirls in his coffee.

"Tom—there's a meeting. Friday. Today. This afternoon."

"A meeting?"

"Of people who live here." Abruptly he looked up and offered the rest in a rush: "They're all mad. *Real* mad, Tom. They've made up their minds to get this line tore down!"

"And you thought I ought to know about it." Tom's brown eyes warmed with amused affection.

"Yes!"

"Well, Jorry, I'm not sure they're not right. These figures we've been collecting..." He dumped out his rain-diluted coffee and poured himself some more from the thermos. "But we won't really know anything until Monday, when the mice go into the lab for testing and mating and dissection."

Tom frowned. "The thing is, the behavior changes in the mice are negative, all right—jumpiness, decreased sexual interest, interrupted sleep patterns: all indicate stress. But they're not *dramatic* changes, not something that makes you sit up and take notice. Not, anyway, if you're on the State Power Commission. Without something more theatrical to offer, any appeal on this line will just get lost in the lobbying. The bureaucratic tendency to not shut the lion's cage till the beastie's loose. Now if the mice had done something really stagy, like grow three-inch fangs or invent espionage warfare... well. But I think all our hard work here may end up just another overlooked scientific study, a dull and ineffective witness for the prosecution. And thanks, Jorry, for the information about the meeting, but I already knew about it. Oh, I'm up on all the local gossip. I board at the Sandersons', you know."

Jorry didn't know. He hadn't ever thought about Tom boarding somewhere, eating breakfast, brushing his teeth. Every day Tom

just *appeared*, like a part of the huge black towers and crackling hum of the line itself. Jorry tried to picture him watching tv with Jeanine Sanderson, who had been in his class at school last year, and a queasy feeling twisted in his stomach. Once he had overheard Mrs. Sanderson tell Jeanine that she "shouldn't play with that Whitfield boy, because with a pa like that, you never knew." The feeling twisted harder. Jorry stood up.

"I got to go."

"You sure . . . it's not your usual time yet. Here—wipe off your cast with the towel. There's coffee on it."

"No!"

"Hey, Jorry—what's wrong?"

"Nothing! I got to go."

"But—"

"I got to go!"

Tom watched him intently. Around the boy's eyes were the beginnings of moist trails streaking the dirt on his thin face.

"Jorry," he said quietly, "Jorry—how did you break your arm?"

The tear trails paled, and the boy made an aborted half-gesture in the direction of throwing up his arm. Then he blinked dully and mumbled, "I fell out of the hay loft."

Tom put an arm around Jorry's shoulders, speaking in a low, serious voice so unlike his usual self that Jorry was startled into listening. "Jorry, you know this is the last day for this project. After I pick up the mice on Monday I won't be back. I don't believe you fell out of the hay loft—no, wait, don't squirm away, listen to me—you're a bright kid, and a damn nice one, and if you stay here . . . Jorry, there are arrangements, laws, for making sure that nothing like that happens to kids. You could leave here, stay with some nice foster family; and I could even visit you on weekends. We could go to a ball game, mess around in my lab. All you have to do is let me take you to Social Services, and then you'll have to be willing to *tell* them—Jorry, wait, listen to me—wait!"

"You're crazy!" Jorry shouted, already backing away. Crazy, crazy, crazy! Tom didn't even need Jorry's information about the meeting—he already had it, already had everything. Let Tom take him away? When Jorry could give Tom nothing but sumac tea he didn't even like, could be worth nothing to Tom, to anyone except Clayte Whitfield, doing farm chores, and even there mostly a useless nuisance—"goddamn nuisance!" his father roared. To be always in the way, always in need, always someone other people's

children shouldn't play with? To be always with nothing to trade for the impatient charity of strangers who traded taking care of you for money from the Welfare—to live like that? Crazy!

"Go take Jeanine Sanderson to a ball game!" he shouted.

"Hey, Jorry—"

"Just leave me *alone*!" And then he was running, clutching his cast awkwardly against his stomach, running with a lopsided lope over the ridge, through the rain.

By the time Jorry reached home, still running, his elbow ached from bouncing against the inside of the cast. Water streamed onto it from his shoulders and hair; with each heaving breath he smelled soaked plaster mingled with damp earth and the wind-borne smell of wet cows. Leaning against the house, Jorry tried to catch his breath, to stop the silent sobs that shook his whole body; before he pushed open the screen door and went inside.

"Where you been, boy?"

Jorry snapped his head upward. Pa, who should have been in town, should have been still at that meeting, was never in the house at this time anyway—Pa was sitting behind the kitchen table, a glass in his big hand. Over the rain smells came that other smell. A pool of it had spilled on the table and one amber drop slid lazily over the edge, hung suspended for a long second, then plopped softly to the floor. Funny about that plop, Jorry thought crazily—you should hardly be able to hear it over the rain, but it filled the room like thunder.

Slowly he reached behind him for the latch to the screen door.

His father's hand caught him at the shoulder and spun him across the kitchen and into the table. The glass shattered on the floor.

"I asked you where you been!"

"Ou-out, Pa!"

Fighting for balance, Jorry twisted his head and gazed at his father in terror. But Whitfield was nodding, a drunken heavy nod that made his head bounce like a dropped sack of grain.

"Out. You been out, and I know where—you think I don't know where. I know where. I been out, too—out with those namby-pamby bastards who don't give a damn if their farms go to hell on account of some fat-assed power company, 'thout doing a damn thing about it but givin' the farms away!" He nodded over and over, repeating the phrase: "Givin' away. Just givin' away.

"And you know what they're gonna do—what got decided at

their big angry meeting—they're gonna send a delegation up to the Congressman . . . up to the Congressman, tiptoein' all polite up to the Capitol, where nobody gives a damn anyway—but not me, boy! Not me! *I* know the only way to set the bastards to rights!" He shoved his face close to Jorry's and hissed again, "Not me!" Rheumy yellowish liquid oozed from the corners of his eyes. "What do you say to that, boy?"

"N-no, Pa."

Whitfield laughed loudly, straightened up, and groped behind him for the missing glass. Jorry edged around the table, numbly eyeing his father's face, until his foot struck something hard. Glancing down, he saw the box from the County Agricultural Agency, open now, spilling out the cylinders that could blast out a stubborn stump no tractor could dislodge, could send it spraying wood chips ten feet into the air. One stick of the dynamite lay half-puddled in amber whiskey. A stump, or a rock—or a truck. 'You been out and I know where.'

"Hey!" Whitfield yelled, and snatched at air. Jorry had barreled across the kitchen and through the door, his cast striking the screen with such force that bits of plaster flaked into the dirty mesh. He stumbled as the rain hit him in a solid sheet, but picked himself up and ran, zig-zagging across the barnyard and around the edge of the barn. Behind him he heard the door bang again and then his father's hoarse yell, the words blown away by wind and rain. Jorry leaned against the barn, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before peering around the corner.

His father was lurching across the-barnyard.

A sudden, unexpected flash of thunder lit up the sky and to Jorry his father suddenly looked huge, a giant swelling blackly to fill up the world and no place to hide and

—the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before the—

Giants!

He ran the length of the barn and headed out toward the hayfield, bent low, huddled over the cast. Cutting diagonally through the rotting hay, running until his lungs ached, stopping only to wipe the streaming water from his eyes before running again, until he collapsed, heaving and panting, in the one place his father had never yet come. Sanctuary.

But for how long?

Jorry wrapped his good hand around the bottom girder and convulsively flexed and unflexed his fingers over the wet metal.

Gradually his breathing slowed and he no longer had to snatch at draughts of wet air. Above him the line crackled and snapped, glowing through the rain with a fuzzy, reddish-blue corona. The line swayed gently, like the smooth surf line of some radioactive sea, but the boy hardly noticed. When he could stand, he began to trudge along the right-of-way, shedding stray bits of hay as he went, and his eyes moved only to jump to the next colossus in the long row of looming black giants safe-guarding his trail.

The truck was gone, and Tom with it.

Only the cages of mice remained. Water slid down the glass sides in smooth, silent trails. The rain had let up, but the sky was darkening, and occasionally thunder drowned out the ceaseless crackle overhead. Jorry stared blankly at the spot where the tarp lean-to had been, and his face twisted sideways.

Gone. Home for the day, home to the Sandersons', home and dry and in no danger at all. Playing checkers with Jeanine and drinking hot coffee and not needing to be warned, not needing anything, because dynamite fuses don't light in the rain and even Pa would remember that. Everyone remembered that, except Jorry. And on Monday Tom would pick up the mice and be gone for good, gone beyond the reaches of Jorry's stupid rescues or bitter tea or anything else he might scrounge up. He wouldn't see Tom again, couldn't see him again, because things didn't work like that. You didn't get things for free, and suddenly he didn't care if Pa blew up every tower on the whole line, one by one, and Jorry himself along with them. He just didn't care.

The boy threw himself down on the damp earth in front of the mice cages and buried his face in his left arm, too spent for tears. The right arm stuck out awkwardly at his side, the cast lying stiff and sodden in the mud.

Gone.

Abruptly, the sky shrieked and cleaved into two blinding halves as a bolt of lightning tore from cloud to cloud. Jorry was hurled back down on his face, the mud tingling below him, while overhead the line flamed red-purple and leaped wildly against its moorings. The crackling mounted to a wailing crescendo, for a confused moment sounding acrid and smelling deafening, and then both sound and smell whirled into a jaundice-colored mist swirling with mice and rain and

—the belt falling and he threw up his arm to shield—across the field stay low don't—more coffee Jorry there's plenty and put

some sugar in your Olympian offering—his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of ozone you watch the line during a storm Jorry it—body currents and brain organelles and the center of perception of his screaming just before the crack of bone in Jeanine Sanderson's head tingling with the smell of—

The mist faded into black. The blackness pulsed and then steadied, and out of it slowly emerged the slipperiness of the mud. Jorry raised his head and shook it from side to side, first cautiously and then, when nothing hurt too much, more vigorously. Thunder rumbled somewhere over the horizon, and the eastern sky paled weakly. The boy sat up and swiped at the mud on his face, smearing it into long dark smudges.

The air smelled scorched, like wet laundry under a too hot iron, and mingled over and under and through was another smell, both familiar and unfamiliar, like a dream half-forgotten.

The smell of fear.

Whose?

Jorry wrinkled up his muddy nose and sniffed. It was fear and it was in his nose, not in his mind or muscles or stomach. As he sniffed he became aware that the elusive smell—how did he know what it was? but he did—had slid down to the back of his throat and become a taste, chalky and metallic.

Wide-eyed, Jorry looked around. A gray mouse was huddled next to the plastic mesh, its whiskers still quivering. Around the matted fur on its wedge-shaped head was a faint red halo.

Instantly Jorry glanced up, but the reddish glow around the line had gone: the cable lay black and inert against the sky. By the time Jorry's eyes swung back to the mouse, the red halo was fading and so was the chalky taste-smell of fear. The mouse uncurled itself, stretched, and wandered along the mesh. From under the sodden newspapers at the back of the cage crept another mouse, smaller and white, with pink ears. The head of the gray mouse began to glow again, this time a flickering marigold yellow, and Jorry breathed in a musky, damp odor that brought no word to his mind but did bring a sudden tightening in his belly muscles and a heaviness in his groin and a confused image of Jeanine Sanderson in her gym shorts.

He hunted up a sharp stick and prodded the gray mouse through the mesh. The marigold yellow flashed into red and again the chalky-metallic smell filled Jorry's nostrils. Slowly he withdrew the stick and gazed at the glass cage, dazed.

Bits and pieces of things Tom had told him vibrated in his head



like struck tuning forks. Brain organelles. Body currents. 'Perception's a likely candidate for change.' Trigger phenomenon. And, incongruously, the smell of coffee.

Was it the mice who were different, giving off their haloes and their emotional smells, or was it something different in *his* brain that made him aware of these things? Jorry put his good hand to his nose and pinched it thoughtfully.

A second later he was scrambling to his feet, his sneakers nearly sliding out from under him in his haste to get to the second cage. It was more difficult to get the stick poked into this one, through the double-wire screening of the Faraday cage and then through the plastic mesh; but he kept at it, his tongue stuck out at the corner of his mouth, until the stick hit something more yielding than glass, less than newspaper. Jorry prodded hard. There was a sudden squeal, and a black mouse head poked out of a pile of shredded editorials. Around the black was a thin halo of red.

Inside the Faraday shield.

Rocking back on his heels and wrinkling his muddy nose against the sudden chalky-metallic smell, the boy stared at his stick, then at the black line stretching overhead, and again at the stick. So it *was* a change inside his own head; if the change had been in the mice, the ones within the Faraday shield wouldn't have been affected. What was happening to him?

The fear only lasted a moment, a sickening moment when he wondered crazily if he would see a red halo if he looked in a mirror. A mirror—what had he been told about a mirror? Who had told him? Oh, yes—Tom.

Jorry's grip tightened around his stick. Another feeling swelled within him, swelled like the breaking of river ice after the winter, splintering the momentary fear and spinning it away in the rush of excitement. Whatever this thing was, this thing he could do now, *he* had found it. He, Jorry Whitfield. It was his discovery, his first step, his vulcanized rubber spilling onto the stove, his. Like a real scientist, like Charles Goodyear, like *somebody*.

Like Tom.

And it was important, this thing. Jorry wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. Important enough, different enough—what had Tom said? 'dramatic'—so those men on the Power Commission would have to listen about the line. Was it good dramatic or bad dramatic? What would those men think about what had happened to him? Jorry didn't know, but he guessed they wouldn't

like it when he told them what colors *their* halos were.

But even when the line was gone—and here he glanced up at it with something almost like affectionate regret—this thing, this Sense, would still be his. His to keep, his to use, his to give to Tom for that scientific report that now was not going to be dull. And if he 'gave' this Sense to Tom, offering him the use of it the way he would have with a new bicycle if he had ever had one, then for the first time Jorry could, in turn, let himself think about the dizzying possibility Tom had talked about, the possibility of leaving, of not having to lie rigid in his bed listening to Pa downstairs with his bottle and wonder if this time . . . he could leave, now. Now that he had earned the right, now that he had this important thing to trade, to swap—

But what had he traded to earn the Sense?

Slowly Jorry sat down in the mud. He had traded nothing; he was even going to help get the line torn down, if that was possible. So the Sense was free, an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction. But that wasn't possible: nothing was free, things didn't go right by themselves, nobody gave you anything without trying to get something greater back, it just didn't work like that. It *never* worked like that.

Did it ever work like that?

Sitting on the wet ground, his stick still in his hand, Jorry felt dizzy. An errant drop of water trickled off the back of his collar and down his neck, and he sneezed.

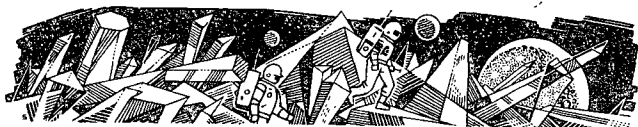
It was difficult fishing the gray mouse out of the cage, using only one hand. When Jorry finally had the damp body clasped around its middle, he squeezed it firmly and started walking over the ridge. At the top he halted abruptly. Far down the line was a dark figure, made tiny by distance, standing motionless in the middle of a wet field of rotting hay. By screwing up his eyes and squinting through the mist, Jorry could just make out the figure of his father, head tilted back to stare upward at the soaring black girders of the line tower. He could make out, too, around the thrown-back head, a thin red halo. On a vagrant puff of wind came the faint smell of chalk.

Jorry blinked and tightened his grip on the mouse until it squealed. His father's arms dangled at his sides, the big hands limp and empty. He was standing well back from the line, well outside the right of way, and the red fear-halo glowed like a blurred mist through the soft rain.

His father? Afraid? His father afraid; small and wet and power-

less by the line, and afraid. Clayte Whitfield. Only a man afraid. Of the line, of his mirror, of the scary confusion in things not always turning out badly, in sometimes ending well, or neither, or both.

Jorry gazed for a long time, his face streaked with mud and concentration. Then he blinked again, turned away, and carried his mouse on his cast, riding in front of him like an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction, over the ridge toward the Sandersons'. His muddy figure loomed tall as a giant against the rainy sky.



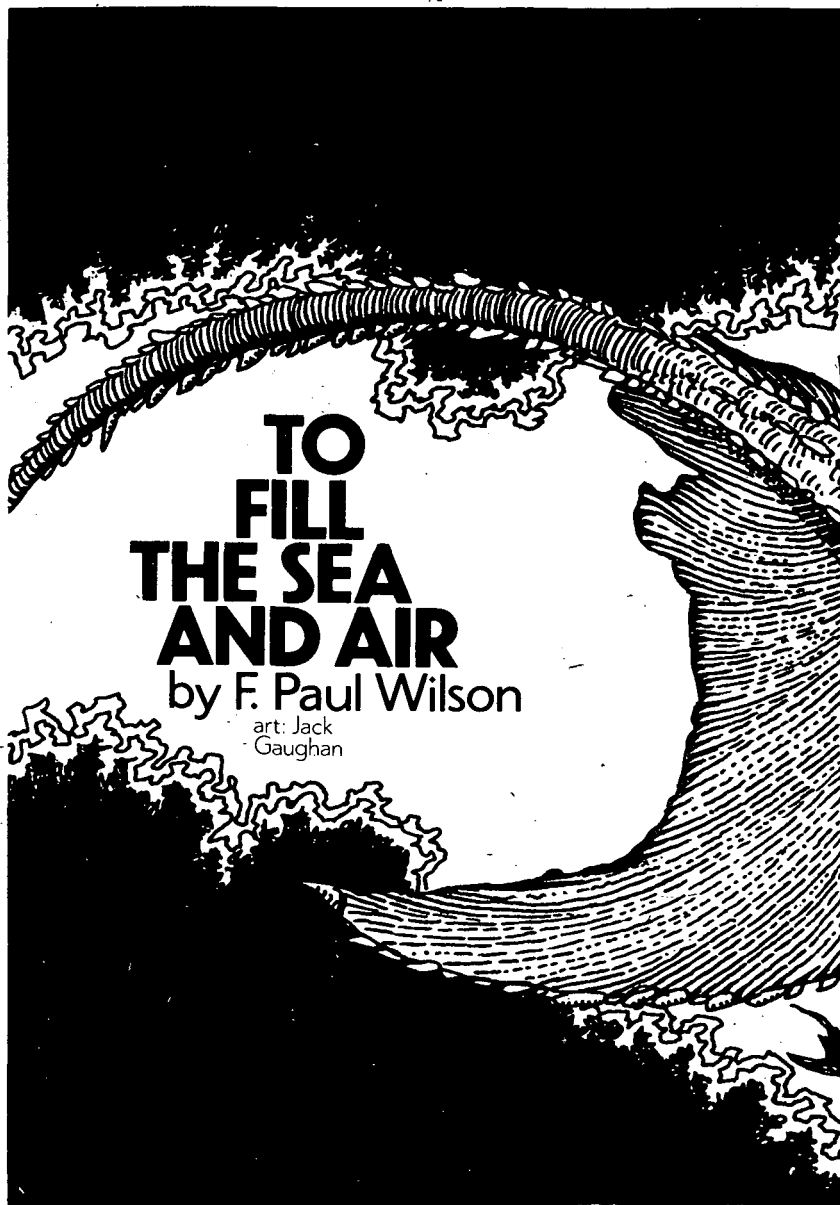
A THIRD SOLUTION TO THE THREE ROBOTS OF PROFESSOR TINKER

(from page 165)

Say to any robot: "If I were to ask each of you whether you are male or female, and your two companions gave the same answer, would your answer agree with theirs?"

The truther would have to say no, the liar would have to say yes, and the sometimer would be unable to reply because she knows that her companions (one a truther, the other a liar) could not give the same answer. By directing this curious question toward any two robots, their identities are established and you will know the identity of the third.

"I must admit," said Isomorph, "that the sometimer could answer yes or no, and either answer would be, in a vague sense, a lie. But I assume that the question would at least cause the sometimer to think a long time before answering, if at all. Therefore I maintain this is a legitimate two-question solution to the first problem."





During the period in question there were two items on the interstellar market for which supply could never equal demand. The intricate, gossamer carvings of the Vanek were one, valued because they were so subtly alien and yet so appreciable on human terms. The other was filet of chispen, a seafood delicacy with gourmet appeal all across Occupied Space. The flavor... how does one describe a unique gustatorial experience, or the mild euphoria that attends consumption of sixty grams or more of the filet?

Enough to say that it was in high demand in those days. And the supply rested completely on the efforts of the individual chispen fishers on Gelk. Many a large interstellar corporation pressed to bring modern methods to the tiny planet for a more efficient harvesting of the fish, but the ruling council of Gelk forbade the intrusion of outside interests. There was a huge profit to be made and the council members intended to see that the bulk of it went into their own pockets.

from *STARS FOR SALE:
An Economic History of Occupied Space*
by Emmerz Fent.

Imagine the sea, smooth slate gray in predawn under a low drifting carapace of cloud. Imagine two high, impenetrable walls parallel on that sea, separated by ten times the height of a tall man, each stretching away to the horizon. Imagine a force-seven gale trapped between those walls and careening toward you, beating the sea below it to a furious lather as it comes.

Now... remove the walls and remove the wind. Leave the on-rushing corridor of turbulent water. That was what Albie saw as he stood in the first boat.

The chispies were running. The game was on. Albie gauged it to be a small school, probably a spur off a bigger run to the east. Good. He didn't want to hit a big run just yet. There were new men on the nets who needed blooding and a small school like the one approaching was perfect.

He signaled to his men at their posts around the net, warning them to brace for the hit. Out toward the sun stood a long dark hull, bristling amidships with monitoring equipment. Albie knew he was being watched but couldn't guess why. He didn't recognize the design and closed his right eye to get a better look with his left. The doctors had told him not to do that. If he had to favor one of his eyes, let it be the artificial one. But he couldn't get

used to it—everything always looked grainy, despite the fact that it was the best money could buy. At least he could see. And if he ever decided on a plastic repair of the ragged scar running across his right eyebrow and orbit, only old friends would know that a chispie wing had ruined that eye. And, of course, Albie would know. He bore the chispies no animosity, though. No Ahab syndrome for Albie. He was glad to be alive, glad to lose an eye instead of his head. There were no prosthetic heads around.

Most of the experienced men on the nets wore scars or were missing bits of ears or fingers. It was part of the game. If they didn't want to play, they could stand on shore and let the chispies swim by unmolested. That way they'd never get hurt. Nor would they get those exorbitant prices people all over Occupied Space were willing to pay for filet of chispen.

Turning away from the dark, skulking hull, Albie trained both eyes on the chispies. He leaned on the wheel and felt the old tingling in his nerve ends as the school approached. The middle of his sixth decade was passing, the last four of them spent on this sea as a chispen fisher . . . and still the same old thrill when he saw them coming.

He was shorter than most of the men he employed; stronger, too. His compact, muscular body was a bit flabbier now than usual, but he'd be back to fighting trim before the season was much older. Standing straight out from his cheeks, chin, and scalp was a knotty mane of white and silver shot through with streaks of black. He had a broad, flat nose, and the skin of his face, what little could be seen, showed the ravages of his profession. Years of long exposure to light from a star not meant to shine on human skin, light refracted down through the atmosphere and reflected up from the water, had left his dark brown skin with a texture similar to the soles of a barefoot reefclimber, and lined it to an extent that he appeared to have fallen asleep under the needle of a crazed tattooist with a penchant for black ink and a compulsion for crosshatching. Eyes of a startling gray shone out from his face like beacons in the night.

The stripe of frothing, raging water was closer now. Albie judged it to be about twenty meters across, so he let his scow drift westward to open the mouth of the net a little wider. Thirty meters seaward to his right lay the anchorboat manned by Lars Zaro, the only man in the crew older than Albie. The floats on the net trailed in a giant semi-circle between and behind them, a cul-de-sac ringed with ten scows of Albie's own design—flat-bottomed

with a centerboard for greater stability—each carrying one gaff man and one freezer man. The two new hands were on freezer duty, of course. They had a long way to go before they could be trusted with a gaff.

Albie checked the men's positions—all twenty-six, counting himself, were set. Then he glanced again at the big ship standing out toward the horizon. He could vaguely make out *GelkCo I* emblazoned across the stern. He wondered why it was there.

"Incredible! That school's heading right for him!"

"Told you."

Two men huddled before an illuminated screen in a dark room, one seated, the other leaning over his shoulder, both watching the progress of the season's first chispen run. The main body of the run was a fat, jumbled streak of light to the right of center on the screen, marking its position to seaward in the deeper part of the trench. They ignored that. It was the slim arc that had broken from the run a few kilometers northward and was now heading directly for a dot representing Albie and his crew that gripped their attention.

"How does he do it?" the seated man asked. "How does he know where they're going to be?"

"You've just asked the question we'd all like answered. Albie uses outdated methods, decrepit equipment, and catches more than anyone else on the water. The average chispen fisher brings home enough to support himself and his family; Albie is rich and the two dozen or so who work for him are living high."

"Well, we'll be putting an end to that soon enough, I guess."

"I suppose we will."

"It's almost a shame." The seated man pointed to the screen. "Just look at that! The school's almost in his net! Damn! It's amazing! There's got to be a method to it!"

"There is. And after seeing this, I'm pretty sure I know what it is." But the standing man would say no more.

Albie returned his attention to the onrushing school, mentally submerging and imagining himself as one with the chispies. He saw glistening blue-white fusiform shapes darting through the water around him in tightly packed formation just below the surface. Their appearance at this point differed markedly from the slow, graceful, ray-like creatures that glide so

peacefully along the seabottoms of their winter spawning grounds to the south or the summer feeding grounds to the north. With their triangular wings spread wide and gently undulating, the chispies are the picture of tranquility at the extremes of their habitat.

But between those extremes . . .

When fall comes after a summer of gorging at the northern shoals, the chispen wraps its barbed wings around its fattened body and becomes a living, twisting missile hurtling down the twelve-hundred-kilometer trench that runs along the coast of Gelk's major land mass.

The wings stay folded around the body during the entire trip. But should something bar the chispies' path—a net, for instance—the wings unfurl as they swerve and turn and loop in sudden trapped confusion. The ones who can build sufficient momentum break the surface and take to the air in a short glide to the open sea. The chispen fisher earns his hazard pay then—the sharp barbed edges of those unfurled wings cut through flesh almost as easily as air.

With the school almost upon him, Albie turned his attention to the net floats and waited. Soon it came: a sudden erratic bobbing along the far edge of the semi-circle. There were always a few chispies traveling well ahead of their fellows and these were now in the net. Time to move.

"Everybody hold!" he yelled and started moving his throttle forward. He had to establish some momentum before the main body of the school hit, or else he'd never get the net closed in time.

As the white water speared into the pocket of net and boats, Albie threw the impeller control onto full forward and gripped the wheel with an intensity that bulged the muscles of his forearms.

The hit came, tugging his head back and causing the impeller to howl in protest against the sudden reverse pull. As Albie turned his boat hard to starboard and headed for Zaro's anchorboat to complete the circle, the water within began to foam like green tea in a blender. He was tying up to Zaro's craft when the first chispies began breaking water and zooming overhead. But the circumscribed area was too small to allow many of them to get away like that. Only those who managed to dart unimpeded from the deep to the surface could take to the air. The rest thrashed and flailed their wings with furious intensity, caroming

off the fibrous mesh of the net and colliding with each other as the gaffers bent to their work.

The game was on.

The boats rocked in the growing turbulence and this was when the men appreciated the added stability of centerboards on the flatbottomed scows. Their helmets would protect their heads, the safety wires gave them reasonable protection against being pulled into the water, but if a boat capsized . . . any man going into that bath of sharp swirling seawings would be ribbon-meat before he could draw a second breath.

Albie finished securing his boat to Zaro's, then grabbed his gaff and stood erect. He didn't bother with a helmet, depending rather on forty years of experience to keep his head out of the way of airborne chispies, but made sure his safety wire was tightly clipped to the back of his belt before leaning over the water to put his gaff to work.

There was an art to the gaffing, a dynamic synthesis of speed, skill, strength, courage, agility and hand-eye coordination that took years to master. The hook at the end of the long pole had to be driven under the scales with a cephalad thrust at a point forward of the chispen's center of gravity. Then the creature's momentum had to be adjusted—*never* countered—into a rising arc that would allow the gaff-handler to lever it out of the water and onto the deck of his scow. The freezer man—Zaro in Albie's case—would take it from there, using hand hooks to slide the flopping fish onto the belt that would run it through the liquid nitrogen bath and into the insulated hold below.

Albie worked steadily, rhythmically, his eyes methodically picking out the shooting shapes, gauging speed and size. The latter was especially important: too large a fish and the pole would either break or be torn from his hands; too small and it wasn't worth the time and effort. The best size was in the neighborhood of fifty kilos—about the weight of a pubescent human. The meat then had body and tenderness and brought the highest price.

Wings slashed, water splashed, droplets flashed through the air and caught in Albie's beard. Time was short. They had to pull in as many as they could before the inevitable happened. Insert the hook, feel the pull, lever the pole, taste the spray as the winged beastie angrily flapped the air on its way to the deck, free the hook and go back for the next. It was the first time all year Albie had truly felt alive.

Then it happened as it always happened: the furious battering

opened a weak spot in the net and the school leaked free into the sea. That, too, was part of the game. After a moment of breath-catching, the men hauled in the remains of the net to pick up the left-overs, the chispies too battered and bloodied by their confused and frantic companions to swim after them.

"Look at that, will you?" the seated man said. "They broke out and now they're heading back to the main body of the run! How do you explain that?" The standing man said nothing and the seated one looked up at him. "You used to work for Albie, didn't you?"

A nod in the dimness. "Once. Years ago. That was before I connected with GelkCo."

"Why don't you pay him a visit? Never know . . . he might come in handy."

"I might do that—if he'll speak to me."

"Oh? He get mad when you quit?"

"Didn't quit. The old boy fired me."

"Hello, Albie."

Albie looked up from where he sat on the sand in a circle of his men, each with a pile of tattered net on his lap. The sun was lowering toward the land and the newcomer was silhouetted against it, his features in shadow. But Albie recognized him.

"Vic? That you, Vic?"

"Yeah, Albie, it's me. Mind if I sit down?"

"Go ahead. Sand's free." Albie gave the younger man a careful inspection as he made himself comfortable. Vic had been raised a beach rat but that was hard to tell now. A tall man in his mid-thirties, he was sleek, slim, and dark with blue eyes and even features. The one-piece suit he wore didn't belong on the beach. His black hair was slicked back, exposing a right ear bereft of its upper third, a physical trait acquired during his last year on the chispens nets. Restoration would have been no problem had he desired it, but apparently he preferred to flaunt the disfigurement as a badge of sorts. It seemed to Albie that he had broken Vic in on the nets only a few days ago, and had sacked him only yesterday. But it had been years . . . eleven of them.

He tossed Vic a length of twine. "Here. Make yourself useful. Can I trust you to do it right?"

"You never let a man forget, do you?" Vic said through an uncertain smile.

"That's because *I* don't forget!" Albie knew there was a sharp edge on his voice; he refused to blunt it with a smile of his own.

The other men glanced at each other, frowning. Albie's mellow temperament was legend among the fishermen up and down the coast, yet here he was, glowering and suffusing the air with palpable tension. Only Zaro knew what lay behind the animosity.

"Time for a break, boys," Zaro said. "We'll down a couple of ales and finish up later."

Albie never allowed dull-witted men out on the nets with him: they took the hint and walked off.

"What brings you back?" he asked when they were alone.

"That." Vic pointed toward the ship on the horizon.

Albie kept his eyes down, concentrating on repairing the net. "Saw it this morning. What's *GelkCo* I mean?"

"She's owned by the GelkCo Corporation."

"So they call it *GelkCo* I? How imaginative."

Vic shrugged and began patching a small hole in the net before him, his expression registering surprise and pleasure with the realization that his hands still knew what to do.

"The Council of Advisors put GelkCo together so the planet could deal on the interstellar market as a corporation."

"Since when do you work for the C. of A.?"

"Since my fishing career came to an abrupt halt eleven years ago." His eyes sought Albie's but couldn't find them. "I went into civil service then. Been on a research and development panel for the Council."

"Civil service, eh?" Albie squinted against the reddening light. "So now you get taxes put *into* your pay instead of taken out."

Vic was visibly stung by the remark. "Not fair, Albie. I earn my pay."

"And what's this corporation supposed to sell?" Albie said, ignoring the protest.

"Filet of chispen."

Albie smiled for the first time. "Oh, really? You mean they've still got chispies on their minds?"

"That's *all* they've got on their minds! And since I spent a good number of years with the best chispen fisher there is, it seemed natural that I be put in charge of developing the chispen as a major export."

"And that ship's going to do it?"

"It has to!" Vic said emphatically. "It must. Everything else was tried before they came to me—"

"They came to me first."

"I know." Vic could not suppress a smile. "And your suggestions were recorded as not only obscene, but physically impossible as well!"

"That's because they really aren't interested in anything about those fish beyond the price per kilo."

"Perhaps you're right, Albie. But that boat out there is unique and it's going to make you obsolete. You won't get hurt financially, I know. You could've retired years ago . . . and should have. Your methods have seen their day. That ship's going to bring this industry up to date."

"Obsolete!" The word escaped behind a grunt of disgust. Albie seriously doubted the C. of A.'s ability to render anything obsolete . . . except maybe efficiency and clear thinking. For the past few years he had been keeping a careful eye on the Council's abortive probes into the chispen industry, had watched with amusement as it tried every means imaginable to obtain a large supply of chispen filet short of actually going out and catching the fish.

The chispies, of course, refused to cooperate, persisting in migratory habits that strictly limited their availability. They spawned in the southern gulf during the winter and fattened themselves on the northern feeding shoals during the summer, and were too widely dispersed at those two locales to be caught in any significant numbers. Every spring they grouped and ran north but were too lean and fibrous from a winter of mating, fertilizing and hatching their eggs.

Only in the fall, after a full summer of feasting on the abundant bait fish and bottom weed indigenous to their feeding grounds, were they right for eating, and grouped enough to make it commercially feasible to go after them. But Gelk's Council of Advisors was convinced there existed an easier way to obtain the filet than casting nets on the water. It decided to raise chispen just like any other feed animal. But chispies are stubborn. They won't breed in captivity, nor will they feed in captivity. This held true not only for adult fish captured in the wild, but for eggs hatched and raised in captivity, and even for chispen clones.

The Council moved on to tissue cultures of the filet but the resultant meat was said to be nauseating.

It eventually became evident to even the most dunderheaded member of the Council that there weren't going to be any shortcuts here. The appeal of chispen filet was the culmination of

myriad environmental factors: the semi-annual runs along the coast gave the meat body and texture; the temperature, water quality, and bottom weed found only on their traditional feeding shoals gave it the unique euphorogenic flavor that made it such a delicacy.

No, there was only one way to supply the discriminating palates of Occupied Space with filet of chispen, and that was to go out on the sea and catch them during the fall runs. They had to be pulled out of the sea and flash-frozen alive before an intestinal enzyme washed a foul odor into the bloodstream and ruined the meat. No shortcuts. No easy way out.

"I didn't come to gloat, Albie. And I mean you no ill will. In fact, I may be able to offer you a job."

"And how could a lowly old gaffer help out on a monstrosity like that?" He turned back to his net repair.

"By bringing fish into it."

Albie glanced up briefly, then down again. He said nothing.

"You can't fool me, Albie. Maybe all the rest, but not me. I used to watch you . . . used to see you talking to those fish, bringing them right into the net."

"You think I'm a psi or something?" The voice had laughter all around the edges.

"I *know* it! And what I saw on the tracking screen this morning proves it!"

"Crazy."

"No. You're a psi! Maybe you don't even know it, but you've got some sort of influence over those fish. You call them somehow and they come running. That's why you're the best."

"You'll never understand, will you. It's—"

"But I do understand! You're a psi who talks to fish!"

Albie's dark lids eclipsed his eyes until only slim crescents of light gray remained.

"Then why," he said in a low voice, "did I have such a rotten season eleven years ago? Why did I have to fire the best first mate I ever had? If I'm a psi, why couldn't I call the chispies into the net that season? Why?"

Vic was silent, keeping his eyes focused on the dark ship off shore. As he waited for an answer, Albie was pulled pastward to the last time the two of them had spoken.

It had been Albie's worst season since he began playing the game. After an excellent start, the numbers of chispen flowing into the freezers had declined steadily through the fall until that

one day at season's end when they sat in their boats and watched the final schools race by, free and out of reach.

That was the day Albie hauled in the net out there on the water and personally gave it a close inspection, actually cutting off samples of net twine and unraveling them. What he found within sent him into a rage.

The first mate, a young man named Vic who was wearing a bandage on his right ear, admitted to replacing the usual twine with fiber-wrapped wire. As Albie approached him in a menacing half-crouch, he explained quickly that he thought too many fish had been getting away. He figured the daily yield could be doubled if they reinforced the net with something stronger than plain twine. He knew Albie had only one hard and fast rule among his crew and that was to repair the net exclusively with the materials Albie provided—no exceptions. So Vic opted for stealth, intending to reveal his ploy at season's end when they were all richer from the extra fish they had caught.

Albie threw Vic into the sea that day and made him swim home. Then he cut the floats off the net and let it sink to the bottom. Since that day he had made a practice of being present whenever the net was repaired.

A long time passed before Albie started feeling like himself again. Vic had been in his crew for six years. Albie had taken him on as a nineteen-year-old boy and had watched him mature to a man on the nets. He was a natural. Raised along the coast and as much at home on the sea as he was on land, he was soon a consummate gaffer and quickly rose to be the youngest first mate Albie had ever had. He watched over Vic, worried about him, bled with him when a chispie wing took a piece of his ear, and seriously considered taking him in as a partner after a few more years. Childless after a lifelong marriage to the sea, Albie felt he had found a son in Vic.

And so it was with the anger of a parent betrayed by one of his own that Albie banished Vic from his boats. He had lived with the anguish of that day ever since.

"There's lots of things I can't explain about that season," Vic said. "But I still think you're a psi, and maybe you could help turn a big catch into an even bigger one. If you want to play coy, that's your business. But at least come out and see the boat. I had a lot to do with the design."

"What's in this for you, Vic? Money?"

He nodded. "Lots of it. And a place on the Council of Advisors."

"That's if everything goes according to plan. What if it fails?"

"Then I'm through. But that's not a realistic concern. It's not going to be a question of failure or success, just a question of *how* successful." He turned to Albie. "Coming out tomorrow?"

Albie's curiosity was piqued. He was debating whether or not to let Zaro take charge of the catch tomorrow... he'd do an adequate job... and it was early in the season.... "When?"

"Mid-morning will be allright. The scanners have picked up a good-sized run up at the shoals. It's on its way down and should be here by midday."

"Expect me."

A hundred meters wide and at least three times as long: those were Albie's estimates. The ship was like nothing he had ever seen or imagined... a single huge empty container, forty-five or fifty meters deep, tapered at the forward end, and covered over with a heavy wire mesh. Albie and Vic stood in a tiny pod on the port rim that housed the control room and crew quarters.

"And this is supposed to make me obsolete?"

"Afraid so." Vic's nod was slow and deliberate. "She's been ready since spring. We've tested and retested—but without chispies. This'll be her christening, her first bleeding." He pointed to the yellow streak creeping down the center of the scanning screen. "And that's going to do it."

Albie noticed a spur off the central streak that appeared to be moving toward a dot at the left edge of the screen.

"My, my!" he said with a dry smile. "Look at those chispies heading for my boats—even without me there to invite them in."

A puzzled expression flitted briefly across Vic's features, then he turned and opened the hatch to the outside.

"Let's go up front. They should be in sight now."

Under a high white sun in a cloudless sky, the two men trod the narrow catwalk forward along the port rim. They stopped at a small observation deck where the hull began to taper to a point. Ahead on the cobalt sea, a swath of angry white water, eighty meters wide, charged unswervingly toward the hollow ship. A good sized run—Albie had seen bigger, but this was certainly a huge load of fish.

"How many of those you figure on catching?"

"Most of them."

Albie's tone was dubious. "I'll believe that when I see it. But let's suppose you do catch most of them—you realize what'll hap-

pen to the price of filet when you dump that much on the market at once?"

"It will drop, of course," Vic replied. "But only temporarily, and never below a profitable level. Don't worry: the Council has it all programmed. The lower price will act to expand the market by inducing more people to take advantage of the bargain and try it. And once you've tried filet of chispen..." He didn't bother to complete the thought.

"Got it all figured out, eh?"

"Down to the last minute detail. When this ship proves itself, we'll start construction on more. By next season there'll be a whole fleet lying in wait for the chispies."

"And what will that kind of harvesting do to them? You'll be thinning them out... maybe too much. That's not how the game's played, Vic. We could end up with no chispies at all some day."

"We'll only be taking the bigger ones."

"The little guys need those bigger ones for protection."

Vic held up a hand. "Wait and see. It's almost time." He signaled to the control pod. "Watch."

Water began to rush into the hold as the prow split along its seam and fanned open into a giant scoop-like funnel; the aft panel split vertically down the middle and each half swung out to the rear. The ship, reduced now to a huge open tube with neither prow nor stern, began to sink.

Albie experienced an instant of alarm but refused to show it. All this was obviously part of the process. When the hull was immersed to two-thirds of its depth, the descent stopped.

Vic pointed aft. "There's a heavy metal grid back there to let the immature chispies through. But there'll be no escape for the big ones. In effect, what we're doing here is putting a huge, tear-proof net across the path of a major run, something no one's dared to do before. With the old methods, a run like this would make chowder out of anything that tried to stop it."

"How do you know they won't just go around you?"

"You know as well as I do, Albie, these big runs don't change course for anything. We'll sit here, half-sunk in the water, and they'll run right into the hold there; they'll get caught up against the aft grid, and before they can turn around, the prow will close up tight and they're ours. The mesh on top keeps them from flying out."

Albie noticed Vic visibly puffing with pride as he spoke, and couldn't resist one small puncture: "Looks to me like all you've

got here is an oversized, motorized seining scoop."

Vic blinked, swallowed, then went on talking after a brief hesitation. "When they're locked in, we start to circulate water through the hold to keep them alive while we head for a plant up the coast where they'll be flash-frozen and processed."

"All you need is some cooperation from the fish."

Vic pointed ahead. "I don't think that'll be a problem. The run's coming right for us."

Albie looked from the bright anticipation in Vic's face to the ship sitting silent and open-mawed, to the onrushing horde of finned fury. He knew what was going to happen next but didn't have the heart to say it. Vic would have to learn for himself.

The stars were beginning to poke through the sky's growing blackness. Only a faint, fading glow on the western horizon remained to mark the sun's passing. None of the moons was rising yet.

With the waves washing over his feet, Albie stood and watched the autumn aurora begin to shimmer over the sea. The cool prevailing breeze carried smoke from his after-dinner pipe away toward the land. Darkness expanded slowly and was almost complete when he heard the voice.

"Why'd you do it, Albie?"

It wasn't necessary to turn around. He knew the voice, but had not anticipated the fury he sensed caged behind it.

"Didn't do a thing, Vic." He kept his eyes on the faint, wavering flashes of the aurora, his own voice calm.

"You diverted those fish!"

"That's what you'd like to believe, I'm sure, but that's not the way it is."

The run had been almost on top of them. The few strays that always travel in the lead had entered the hold and slammed into the grate at the other end. Then the run disappeared. The white water evaporated and the sea became quiet. In a panic, Vic had run back to the control pod where he learned from the scanner that the run had sounded to the bottom of the trench and was only now rising toward the surface . . . half a kilometer aft of the ship. Vic had said nothing, glaring only momentarily at Albie and then secluding himself in his quarters for the rest of the day.

"It's true!" Vic's voice was edging toward a scream. "I watched your lips! You were talking to those fish . . . telling them to dive!"

Albie swung around, alarmed by the slurred tones and growing

hysteria in the younger man's voice. He could not make out Vic's features in the darkness, but could see the swaying outline of his body. He could also see what appeared to be a length of driftwood dangling from his right hand.

"How much've you had to drink, Vic?"

"Enough." The word was deformed by its extrusion through Vic's clenched teeth. "Enough to know I'm ruined and you're to blame."

"And what's the club for? Gonna break my head?"

"Maybe. If you don't agree to straighten out all the trouble you caused me today, I just might."

"And how do you expect me to do that?"

"By guiding the fish *into* the boat instead of under it."

"Can't do that, Vic." Albie readied himself for a dodge to one side or the other. The Vic he had known on the nets would never swing that club. But eleven years had passed . . . and this Vic was drunk. "Can't do it as I am now, and I sure as hell won't be able to do it any better with a broken head. Sorry."

There followed a long, tense, silent moment. Then two sounds came out of the darkness: one, a human cry—half sob, half scream of rage; followed by the grating thud of wood hurled against wet sand. Albie saw Vic's vague outline slump into a sitting position.

"Dammit, Albie! I trusted you! I brought you out there in good faith and you scuttled me!"

Albie stepped close to Vic and squatted down beside him. He put the bit of his pipe between his teeth. The bowl was cold but he didn't bother relighting it.

"It wasn't me, Vic. It was the game. That ship of yours breaks all the rules of the game."

"The game?" Vic said, head down, bitterness compressing his voice. "You've been talking about games since the day I met you. This is no game, Albie! This is my life . . . my future!"

"But it's a game to the chispies. That's what most people don't understand about them. That's why only a few of us are any good at catching them: those fish are playing a game with us."

Vic lifted his head. "What do you take me for?"

"It's true. Only a few of us have figured it out, and we don't talk it around. Had you stayed with me a few years longer, I might have told you if you hadn't figured it out for yourself by then. Truth is, I'm no psi and I don't direct those fish into my net; they find their way in on their own. If they get caught in my net, it's because they *want* to."

"You've been out on the nets too long, Albie. Chispies can't think."

"I'm not saying they can think like you and me, but they're not just dumb hunks of filet traveling on blind instinct, either. Maybe it only happens when they're packed tight and running, maybe they form some sort of hive-mind then that they don't have when they're spread out. I don't know. I don't have the words or knowledge to get across what I mean. It's a gut feeling . . . I think they look on the net as a game, a challenge they'll accept only if we play by the rules and only if we give them a decent chance of winning."

He paused, waiting for another wisecrack from Vic, but none came. He continued. "They can gauge a net's strength. Don't know how, but they do it. Maybe it's those few fish always traveling in the lead . . . if they find the net too strong, if there's no chance of them breaking out, they must send out some kind of warning and the rest of the run avoids it. Sounds crazy, I know, but there's one inescapable fact I've learned to accept and apply, and it's made me the best: the weaker the net, the bigger the catch."

"So that's why you fired me when you found out I was repairing the nets with wire!"

"Exactly. You were hunting for a shortcut with the chispies and there aren't any. You made the net too strong, so they decided to play the game somewhere else. I wound up with the worst season I ever had."

"And I wound up in the water and out of a job!" Vic began to laugh, a humorless sound, unpleasant to hear. "But why didn't you explain this then?"

"Why didn't you come to me when you wanted to experiment with my nets? Why didn't you go buy your own tear-proof net and try it out on your own time? I may have overreacted, but you went behind my back and betrayed my trust. The entire crew went through pretty lean times until the next season because you broke the rules of the game!"

Vic laughed again. "A game! I must be drunker than I thought—it almost makes sense!"

"After forty years of hauling those winged devils out of the water, it's the only way I can make sense out of it."

"But they get caught and die, Albie! How can that be a game for them?"

"Only a tiny portion of the run challenges me at a time, and

only a small percentage of those go into the freezer. The rest break free. What seems like a suicide risk to us may be only a diversion to them. Who knows what motivates them? This is their planet, their sea, and the rules of the game are entirely up to them. I'm just a player—one who figured out the game and became a winner."

"Then I'm a loser, I guess—the biggest damn loser ever to play." He rose to his feet and faced out toward the running lights of the *GelkCo I* as it lay at anchor a league off shore.

"That you are," Albie said, rising beside him and trying to keep his tone as light as possible. "You built the biggest, toughest damn net they've ever seen, one they'd never break out of . . . so they decided not to play."

Vic continued to stare out to sea, saying nothing.

"That's where you belong," Albie told him. "You were born for the sea, like me. You tried your hand with those stiff-legged land-roamers on the Council of Advisors and came up empty. But you and me, we're not equipped to deal with their kind, Vic. They change the rules as they go along, trying to get what they want by whatever means necessary. They sucked you in, used you up, and now they're gonna toss you out. So now's the time to get back on the water. Get out there and play the game with the chispies. They play hard and fast, but always by the same rules. You can die out there, but not because they cheated."

Vic made no move, no sound.

"Vic?"

No reply.

Albie turned and walked up the dune alone.

"Albieeeeeee!"

One of the dock hands came running along the jetty. Albie had just pushed off and was following his crew into the early morning haze. He idled his scow and waited for the man to get closer.

"Guy back at the boathouse wants to know if you need an extra hand today."

Albie held his breath. "What's he look like?"

"I dunno," the dock hand said with a shrug. "Tall, dark hair, a piece missing from his right—"

Albie smiled through his beard as he reversed the scow. "Tell him to hurry . . . I haven't got all day!"

And out along the trench, the chispies moved in packs, running south and looking for sport along the way.

ONE REJECTION TOO MANY

by Patricia Nurse

Mrs. Nurse was born Patricia Plant in a suburb of London, England, and emigrated to Canada 1955, where she promptly snagged a Canadian husband. In due course they produced a delightful son, who is studying engineering at the University of Western Ontario. She blames a stray copy of Writer's Digest for reviving her interest in writing. This story is her first sale.

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Imagine my delight when I spotted your new science fiction magazine on the news-stands. I have been a fan of yours for many, many years and I naturally wasted no time in buying a copy. I wish you every success in this new venture.

In your second issue I read with interest your plea for stories from new authors. While no writer myself, I have had a time traveller living with me for the past two weeks (he materialized in the bathtub without clothes or money, so I felt obliged to offer him shelter), and he has written a story of life on earth as it will be in the year 5000.

Before he leaves this time frame, it would give him great pleasure to see his story in print—I hope you will feel able to make this wish come true.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your kind letter and good wishes.

It is always refreshing to hear from a new author. You have included some most imaginative material in your story; however, it is a little short on plot and human interest—perhaps you could

rewrite it with this thought in mind.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was sorry that you were unable to print the story I sent you. Vahl (the time traveller who wrote it) was quite hurt as he tells me he is an author of some note in his own time. He has, however, rewritten the story and this time has included plenty of plot and some rather interesting mating rituals which he has borrowed from the year 3000. In his own time (the year 5015) sex is no longer practised, so you can see that it is perfectly respectable having him in my house. I do wish, though, that he could adapt himself to our custom of wearing clothes—my neighbours are starting to talk!

Anything that you can do to expedite the publishing of Vahl's story would be most appreciated, so that he will feel free to return to his own time.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your rewritten short story.

I don't want to discourage you but I'm afraid you followed my suggestions with a little too much enthusiasm—however, I can understand that having an imaginary nude visitor from another time is a rather heady experience. I'm afraid that your story now rather resembles a far-future episode of Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman or Soap.

Could you tone it down a bit and omit the more bizarre sex rituals of the year 3000—we must remember that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* is intended to be a family publication.

Perhaps a little humor would improve the tale too.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Vahl was extremely offended by your second rejection—he said he has never received a rejection slip before, and your referring to him as “imaginary” didn’t help matters at all. I’m afraid he rather lost his temper and stormed out into the garden—it was at this unfortunate moment that the vicar happened to pass by.

Anyway, I managed to get Vahl calmed down and he has rewritten the story and added plenty of humor. I’m afraid my subsequent meeting with the vicar was not blessed with such success! I’m quite sure Vahl would not understand another rejection.

Yours truly,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I really admire your persistence in rewriting your story yet another time. Please don’t give up hope—you can become a fairly competent writer in time, I feel sure.

I’m afraid the humor you added was not the kind of thing I had in mind at all—you’re not collaborating with Henny Youngman by any chance are you? I really had a more sophisticated type of humor in mind.

Yours truly,

Isaac Asimov

P.S. Have you considered reading your story, as it is, on The Gong Show?

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It really was very distressing to receive the return of my manuscript once again—Vahl was quite speechless with anger.

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevailed upon him to refine the humor you found so distasteful, and I am submitting his latest rewrite herewith.

In his disappointment, Vahl has decided to return to his own time right away. I shall be sorry to see him leave as I was getting very fond of him—a pity he wasn't from the year 3000 though. Still, he wouldn't have made a very satisfactory husband; I'd have never known where (or when) he was. It rather looks as though my plans to marry the vicar have suffered a severe setback too. Are you married, Dr. Asimov?

I must close this letter now as I have to say goodbye to Vahl. He says he has just finished making some long overdue improvements to our time frame as a parting gift—isn't that kind of him?

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I am very confused by your letter. Who is Isaac Asimov? I have checked with several publishers and none of them has heard of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, although the address on the envelope was correct for *this* magazine.

However, I was very impressed with your story and will be pleased to accept it for our next issue. Seldom do we receive a story combining such virtues as a well-conceived plot, plenty of human interest, and a delightfully subtle brand of humor.

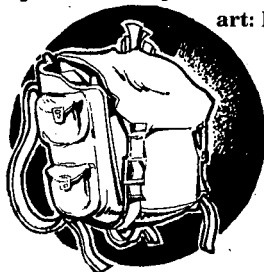
Yours truly,

George H. Scithers,
Editor,
Arthur C. Clarke's Science Fiction Magazine

ON THE WAY

by Conway Conley

art: Freff



The author wanted to do science fiction about the time he started college. In time (which included four college majors, a year's work experience, a B.S. degree, and a Navy hitch) he decided to write it instead. It took a year, he tells us, to make his first sale, this story.

The bed was low, and he struggled for some time to get to his feet. Several times he almost invented different furniture; chairs, perhaps, or a bed high enough that a person could get his legs under himself when getting out of it. Finally, by finding hand-holds on the rough-textured wall, he was able to stand.

He looked down at his bed. There beside it was the bell, placed within easy reach the first day he hadn't gotten out of bed. And the cup and jug, which had been moved back a little each time they tended him, for fear he would spill it into his bedding. There was no clock; in fact there was only one in the house, and he wasn't so used to measuring time as to think of counting his last hours.

He faced the door and pushed at the wall, gently, then a little harder until he was away from its support and walking. Might have to follow the wall around to the door; no, he could balance well enough to walk across the middle of the floor.

The outer room was empty; he surveyed it while he rested holding to the doorframe. Then he launched himself toward the outer door. Step by step; suddenly a voice sounded behind him, "Grand-sire, where are you going? Marsha says we've made things so you'll be comfortable in bed," and a youngster appeared to his right.

Carefully gathering breath to speak without losing his concentration on walking, he said, "A man's got to be comfortable in his spirit as well as his body."

The child watched silently, curious and uncertain about the struggles of one in the terminal stage of life.

"Here, open that door, will you?" he grunted.

"I'm not sure that Marsha or Todd'd want me to," but the youngster hardly hesitated, making it clear that a certain word

from him still drew more respect than implications dropped by those two. Which ones were they, he wondered as he rested in the outer doorway. He had a granddaughter named Marsha, he was sure, but they might have given a later child the same name. As for Todd, that sounded like a grand- or great-grandchild.

The boy held the door until he shoved off from the doorframe and started walking across the yard. After that he didn't see or hear him; he didn't want to try looking behind.

The sky was blue with sunlit clouds. Too bright, actually, but he couldn't see well in dim light either; evening would come on a little earlier for him than for the others.

Sky above and ground beneath; an improvement over indoors, but he still wanted a clear view of the horizon. There was a knoll west of the house, and that was where he wanted to be.

"Grandsire, whatever is the matter? Why didn't you tell us?" The new interruption broke his concentration on walking over the slightly uneven ground; he was tiring. He stood and watched the woman-child running toward him. This one he remembered, though the name had slipped from him again. Very attractive, and about fifteen. Some men when they reached senior years misjudged the ages of teenage girls. He knew because he had done it; but he had had ample time since then to learn to tell ages all over again, as the great-grandchildren and their children grew so numerous that he lost track of names and parentage.

He was tired; he leaned on the proffered young body and directed her steps, "Out. Out to where the grass meets the sky." He thought that was a pretty good line, at least considering that it was extemporaneous.

But as they passed a bench she said, "Do you want to rest, Grandsire?" And he scanned the way west to the knoll, found it devoid of anything on which to sit, and said, "Yes."

"You like the out-of-doors, Grandsire?"

He liked her sensible approach to a person's wants and needs. "I was on a journey when I came here. Stayed most of my life, but I felt I should at least start on a little way."

Her face took on a serious look. Apparently she felt as if he had always been here. "I've heard you were a pet of the Overholders," she said, and it was obvious that she had put that information in the back of her mind, not forgotten but out of reach of her feelings until now.

"Until I was forty."

"I've never seen an Over."

"They've probably seen you. But you know what they look like, of course?"

She nodded doubtfully. "I've seen the pictures and all that, but I don't think it's the same as seeing one, certainly not like actually going up and touching them."

He was silent then.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Thinking about Inzlai, the Overholder who was my mistress—that's feminine for master, if you'll recall—and how she used to pick me up and hold me and ask me how my history was coming. She didn't understand most of it; computer scientists and engineers make better pets because any young Overholder can understand what they're doing. But Inzlai liked me anyway."

He paused, wondering how much this human child who had never seen a member of the ruling race wanted to know, or wanted to hear from him since she'd probably already been taught it by her parents or uncles, aunts or grandparents. "The young ones who keep pets develop a knack for communicating with humans, but if you want to really talk with an Overholder you have to find one who has gone on to study it as an adult. I never really tried; wanted to work on my problem myself, through human resources."

They were silent for a minute or two, then, as if she had just worked her way through what he had said, suddenly she asked, "And what was your problem?"

"Two questions, actually. Is this our native planet, the world called Terra? And were we here first, or the Overholders?"

"It seems natural enough," she said, gazing off as if to include the sun and air and living things. "Except sometimes, when you can't get quite right. But I suppose they could have changed our chemistry to match this world if they brought us here from somewhere else."

"Or if we stowed away on their starships. It's less likely; but if this isn't Terra, and if we've weighed the legends aright to say that we never got very far into space by ourselves, I've always liked the idea that we took our own passage."

"I'd like to walk on out to the knoll now."

She helped him to stand. Then he put an arm on her shoulders, and found that he liked that as much as he liked getting out of the house. Wondered if this was one of his twice-great- or even thrice-great- grandchildren. All the later generations must be descendants of his by now; there had never been many people in

the group. Maybe he was exaggerating his age. Children didn't come often in these times; it had been the occasion for a party when his granddaughter had conceived at the age of only twenty-five. Maybe he wasn't old enough to be a thrice-great-grandfather. He wondered if the incest taboo extended as far as twice-greats. The old book said that the thought in the heart was as much as the act; he doubted that he had it left in him to get beyond thinking. Their community was too small to have formal rules for uncommon situations, but great-greats probably had fewer genes in common than did some of the couplings they had allowed, so he could let himself think as lasciviously as he wanted.

She asked, "How did you get away when you were a pet?"

"I didn't really want to get away from Inzlai, surprising as that may sound. Her holding—her family, roughly, but I guess you know how hard their society is for us to understand, with so many life stages and more sexes than we have—they were on a trip away from their usual habitation, and I was often out exploring libraries and I forgot when they were leaving. We had been there ten years; I was only thirty when we got there, and that much time seemed nearly as long and vague to me then as it does to you now.

"When I got back to the campsite, there was nothing there. Except a backpack with some things I might need, and a note from Inzlai, so I set out walking to get home."

"Maybe they took off for another planet or solar system."

"She wouldn't have sent me a quarter of the way around the planet to find an empty holding. She knew I might make it, because she had told me of another pet that had found her way home even further, and I had told her I'd heard the same story from other pets. And I would have made it, if I hadn't stopped off here."

"Because establishing an independent human colony was more important than going to see an Overholder," she recited.

"Actually, I didn't intend to stay. It was about to rain when I came upon Carl and Thelma and Leslie working desperately to get some hay into the barn before it got wet, and I helped even though I didn't know much about hay at the time."

He stopped talking, aware that he had caused some confusion. The Carl and Thelma and Leslie of whom he spoke had died, others had been born and given the names, long before this child's birth, and it took her a moment to check the facts she knew. When her face signalled that she had the characters in order, he

continued. "They let me stay until the rain stopped and the grass dried; and then the cow, the only one and the mother of all that you have now, had gotten loose and wandered off. They had to find her, so I joined the hunt. And then helped to build a fence. One thing led to another. Winter came, and I stayed over. Spring, and I wanted to plant enough of the new crops to pay for what I'd eaten over the winter. Summer, and I was so involved with the care of the crops that I wanted to see them harvested. But I was still on my way home. Just spending a little time with my own people on the way."

"And I always thought it was because we were important," she pouted.

"Judge for yourself; you're old enough to do that. Everyone who was here when I stopped by has been dead and gone sixty years, and I've just gotten this far west of the house on my journey. Let me sit down; I can see the way I was going. I think," he hedged, realizing that a gray curtain had come down between him and the world. They sat on the grass.

"There are no Overholders around here," she said, speaking out of her own thoughts.

"They may be watching us right now. Or not. Maybe this colony was their idea to start with, or maybe they don't know we're here. You never know about the Overholders."

"Did Inzlai have the furry arms?"

"Yes. When they're about that age (I think she was about four hundred), they don't care much whether they look handsome or dignified (to other Overholders); so if they keep soft-skinned pets they usually grow soft flesh and hair on one set of arms, the better to take care of us. Inzlai's were not quite as soft as you are, but more satiny. It was her second triad of arms; I was vain at the time and wanted her to change her first triad for me and use her second three arms for the things she needed hard skin for. But she didn't."

"I bet after she lost you she grew soft fur on both triads. Not for always, just for a few years."

"Too inconvenient, but that's a generous thought, child. I don't know what to call you."

"Evelyn."

"Are you my great-great-granddaughter or my great-great-great-granddaughter?"

"Both. My father Carl is your daughter Velda's grandson, and my mother Inzlai is your daughter Sharon's great-granddaughter."

"Inzlai. I wasn't sure we'd used the name. Who was her mother?"

"Thelma. Thelma II."

"And whose child is Carl?"

She giggled; it took him a moment to realize he had called her father a child. Then she said, "Leslie II's. Listen, how can you be sure Inzlai—the Overholder, not my mother; I don't know how we'll keep the names straight if we have any more Inzlai's, 'cause I can't figure out whether my mother is Inzlai the First or Inzlai the Second. Anyway, maybe your mistress got tired of you, didn't want any soft arms anymore and so forth, and just dumped you. Maybe her holding wanted her to grow up."

"I trust her. As for growing up, she was just starting a stage that lasts about two hundred years; few Overholders that have pets lose interest in them before six hundred.

"Besides, Overholders hardly ever abandon a pet. I've heard stories that if they can no longer keep one or find another to take it, they'll sometimes kill it. One story has it that former pets sometimes turn into real nuisances. Another is that they do it to save us starving or dying of exposure.

"I suppose that could happen if they didn't have some place like our colony to come to."

After a time she said, "I've heard most of these things before, but they come out different when I hear them from you."

She was quiet then. The warmth of the sun slowly mixed with the cool morning air. His thoughts were as the day, warm and poignant and blurred around the edges so that he couldn't be sure how much he thought of his uncompleted journey and how much of his grandchild's grandchild.

The sun rose further, and now part of his sunshine rose too, the part named Evelyn. "Is there anything you need that I can send from the house?" she asked.

"Something to lean against." He lay back on the grass; he had been sitting too long.

Some time later a man carried out a rolled-up mattress and arranged it as a backrest, so that he could face west. As the sun grew hot a youth set up a sunshade. Still later a child brought a flask and asked if he was thirsty, and helped him raise it to his lips. Cider; he liked it, though really he could taste so little these last few days that they might about as well have saved the cider for themselves and sent him water.

He watched the western horizon and imagined himself walking

across it. Inzlai would probably still be with her holding in the same location; he thought he would recognize her yet, even with six hard glassy arms.

Favored pets lived a long time; even by the time he was forty she must have given him more than she was supposed to of whatever it was, or he wouldn't have lived a century beyond the natural span. Even now, he wondered, if he were there and not here, would she lift the weight of age from him and keep him vigorous for another half century or beyond?

Just as he could tell the sun was going down the afternoon sky, Evelyn returned. "Great-great-great-grandfather," and it was the first time she had used the full title, "By what name were you known when you were a pet of Inzlai?"

"Thomas Huntington Clifford Pence. Five-eight-one-four-two-three-seven."

She wrote. Then she held papers in front of him. "Is this the map Inzlai left for you, and these you drew from memory, and this was given you by a human you met?" He had difficulty focusing, but he recognized the buildings of the holding in his sketches, and the maps. He nodded. She put them in a backpack that he recognized as the one he had hung in the First House one rainy evening a century plus a generation ago, and still he did not understand. She hesitated with her arms already into the straps, set it down, and said, "Give me your blessing, Grandsire the eldest." She swooped down too quickly for his aging eyes to follow and kissed him full on the mouth (which he feared had let some of the cider run down his chin). He put his arms around her, murmuring, "Sweet, sweet child," as she pressed her body against him for a brief moment that reached back through the generations he had tarried here. Then she was on her feet, and in another moment the pack (strong as when Inzlai had left it at the campsite) was on her strong young back, and she turned and started off to the west. At last he understood what she had said. And he wanted to call after her; but he was confused as to what he should say, perhaps ask if she had made sure there were duplicate maps and did her parents know where she was going. But he couldn't find the strength. His eyes were dimming, but for a long time he could see Evelyn walking across the western horizon.

THE CASTAWAYS

by Jeanne Dillard

art: Phil Foglio



A serious problem faces us with tales such as this one: should we keep secret until the last possible moment that it is an entry in the horrid pun contest, or should we post warning signs, so to speak? One the one hand, some of the surprise will be lost; on the other, some of you would much rather be warned off. What do you think?

Miss Dillard has a B.A. in Russian; She is a native and resident of Florida. She writes SF because she cannot help herself. She originally had no intention of submitting any of her work for publication, but did so at the urging of her best friend, an aspiring (but alas!, unpublished) writer. This is Miss Dillard's first sale. Her friend has not spoken to her since.

Wechter groaned. He turned over slowly, sat up and spat out a mixture of seaweed and sand. His jumpsuit was encrusted with damp sand and lay sodden and clammy next to his skin. He blinked at the dazzlingly bright sun and scowled.

Several yards away, his first mate lay sprawled across the beach, gentle waves lapping at his heels.

Wechter made a move as if to get up and go over to his first mate, but winced in agony and decided it was best to keep his seat.

"Elijah!" he barked. "Elijah!"

The figure stirred.

"Elijah, come here!" commanded Wechter.

The figure moaned softly, then got up on its hands and knees and crawled painfully over to Wechter. "Captain, what happened?" Elijah asked plaintively. Elijah was bald, large and not particularly intelligent.

"We're shipwrecked, you idiot. We must have entered the

planet's orbit too fast—it's a wonder we didn't burn! Dammit, Elijah, how many times do I have to tell you—"

"It couldn't have been that, sir," Elijah whimpered. "Honest, I watched the velocity this time . . ."

"Well, then, there must have been some malfunction in the controls," and Wechter cut him short with a wave of his hand. "What I want to know is, where the hell are we?"

"Aldebaran Five, sir."

"I know that, you fool! I meant what country."

"Oh," said Elijah.

They both surveyed their surroundings in silence. There was no sign of civilization, only miles and miles of violet sea.

"What I need is a map," said Wechter wistfully.

"There's one on board the ship, sir," Elijah volunteered helpfully.

"You idiot, I *know* there's one on the ship! It just so happens that the ship is out there in that ocean, full of water!"

Elijah sighed unhappily. The ship's silver hull shone brightly a few thousand yards from the shore as it reflected the brilliant sunlight.

Elijah thought hard for a moment. "Maybe a patrol will find us soon," he suggested.

"Aldebaran is an underdeveloped planet. There aren't any patrols here," Wechter stated bitterly. "We will certainly die of exposure or starvation, or both."

"Starvation?" his first mate asked fearfully.

"Our rations are on the ship, idiot."

"Oh," said Elijah.

"Well," Wechter said grumpily, "I suppose I may as well face death standing up. Get up, Elijah." They rose to their feet after much struggling.

Wechter surveyed the terrain about them. There wasn't much to see. They were on a small flat island, with no vegetation to speak of save a tall, dark red plant which rather resembled aloë.

"Great," said Wechter. "Just great. No food, no drinking water, no shelter."

Elijah whimpered.

Toward sunset, Elijah's stomach began to rumble.

"Dammit, Elijah," said Wechter, "can't you starve to death quietly?"

"I'm sorry," Elijah apologized, "but I'm so-o-o, hungry. And

thirsty."

"You think *I* don't get hungry, Elijah? You think *I* don't get thirsty?"

Elijah's stomach rumbled again. He began to eye the red plants with interest.

"Go ahead, Elijah. Let me know what it tastes like. After all," Wechter added philosophically, "you've got nothing to lose but your life."

Elijah picked a leaf off one of the plants and ate it. Wechter watched with keen interest. Elijah picked and ate another leaf, then another.

"Well?" Wechter demanded.

"Delicious," said Elijah.

Between the two of them, they devoured twelve of the dark red plants.

Wechter opened his eyes to the piercing white sunlight. He sat up stiffly, rubbing his eyes. "Elijah?" he called. "Are you up?" He looked over at his first mate. And gasped.

Elijah lay sleeping, every inch of his skin a beautiful shade of dark red.

"Elijah!" Wechter screamed.

Elijah awoke, looked at his captain, and gave a start. "Look at you, sir! Just look at you!"

Wechter looked down at his own hands, whose color matched Elijah's.

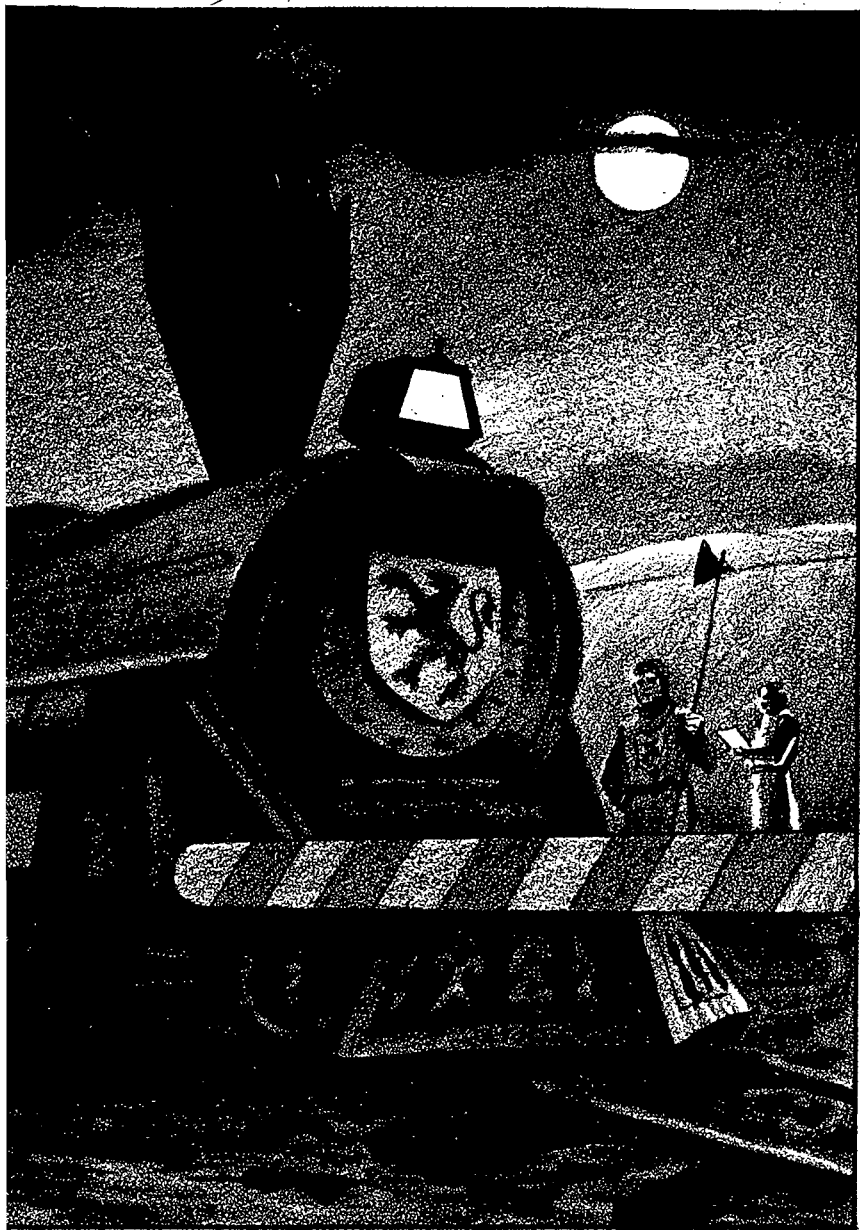
"My God!" wailed Wechter. "We're marooned!"

The Napoli Express

by Randall Garrett

art: Jack Gaughan





Be warned: Lord Darcy's world is not quite like our own: the Plantagenets rule both France and England, magic is a science, and our tale is not set on the Orient Express.

I

His Royal Highness, Prince Richard, Duke of Normandy, seated on the edge of his bed in the Ducal Palace at Rouen, had taken off one boot and started on the other when a discreet rap came at the door.

"Yes? What is it?" There was the sound of both weariness and irritation in his voice.

"Sir Leonard, Highness. I'm afraid it's important."

Sir Leonard was the Duke's private secretary and general factotum. If he said something was important, it was. Nevertheless—

"Come in, then, but damn it, man, it's five o'clock in the morning! I've had a hard day and no sleep."

Sir Leonard knew all that, so he ignored it. He came through the door and stopped. "There is a Commander Dhuglas downstairs, Highness, with a letter from His Majesty. It is marked *Most Urgent*."

"Oh. Well, let's see it."

"The Commander was instructed to deliver it into your hands only, Highness."

"Bother," said His Highness without rancor, and put his boot back on.

By the time he got downstairs to the room where Commander Dhuglas was waiting, Prince Richard no longer looked either tired or disheveled. He was every inch a tall, blond, handsome Plantagenet, member of a proud family that had ruled the Anglo-French Empire for over eight centuries.

Commander Dhuglas, a spare man with graying hair, bowed when the Duke entered. "Your Highness."

"Good morning, Commander. I understand you have a letter from His Majesty."

"I do, Your Highness." The naval officer handed over a large, ornately sealed envelope. "I am to wait for an answer, Your Highness."

His Highness took the letter and waved toward a nearby chair. "Sit down, Commander, while I see what this is all about."

He himself took another chair, broke the seal on the envelope

and took out the letter.

At the top was the embossed seal of the Royal Arms, and, below that:

My dear Richard,

There has been a slight change in plans. Due to unforeseen events at this end, the package you have prepared for export must go by sea instead of overland. The bearer of this letter, Commander Edwy Dhuglas, will take it and your courier to their destination aboard the vessel he commands, the White Dolphin. She's the fastest ship in the Navy, and will make the trip in plenty of time.

*All my best,
Your loving brother,
John*

Prince Richard stared at the words. The "package" to which His Majesty referred was a freshly negotiated and signed naval treaty between Kyril, the emperor at Constantinople, and King John. If the treaty could be gotten to Athens in time, Kyril would take steps immediately to close the Sea of Marmora against certain Polish "merchant" vessels—actually disguised light cruisers—which King Casimir's navy was building in Odessa. If those ships got out, Casimir of Poland would have naval forces in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic for the first time in forty years. The treaty with the Scandinavians, at the end of the 1939 war, had stopped the Poles from getting out of the Baltic, but the treaty with the Greeks at that time had had holes in it.

The present treaty closed those holes, but Kyril would not act until the signed treaty was in his hands. There were three of the disguised cruisers in the Black Sea now; once they got past the Dardanelles, it would be too late. They had to be trapped in the Sea of Marmora, and that meant the treaty had to be in Athens within days.

Plans had been laid, timetables set and mathematically calculated to get that treaty there with all possible haste.

And now, His Imperial Majesty, John IV, by the Grace of God King of England, France, Scotland, and Ireland; Emperor of the Romans and Germans; Premier Chief of the Moqtessumid Clan; Son of the Sun; Lord and Protector of the Western Continents of New England and New France; Defender of the Faith, had changed those plans. He had every right to do so, of course; there was no question of that. But—

Prince Richard looked at his wristwatch and then at Commander Dhuglas. "I am afraid this message from the King my brother is a little late, Commander. The item to which he refers should be leaving Paris on the *Napoli Express* in five minutes."

II

The long, bright-red cars of the *Napoli Express* seemed almost eager to get into motion; the two ten-inch-wide stripes along their length—one white and one blue—almost gave the impression that they were already in motion. Far down the track ahead, nearly outside the South Paris Station, the huge engine steamed with a distant hissing.

As usual, the *Express* was loaded nearly full. She only made the run from Paris to Napoli twice a week, and she usually had all the passengers she could handle—plus a standby waiting list.

The trouble with being a standby is that when a reservation is cancelled at the last moment, the standbys, in order of precedence, have to take the accommodations offered or give them up to the next in line.

The poshest compartments on the *Napoli Express* are the eight double compartments on the last car of the train, the Observation Car, which is separated from the rest of the train by the dining car. All sixteen places had been reserved, but three of them had been cancelled at the last moment. Two of them had been filled by standbys—who rather reluctantly parted with the extra fare required, but the sixteenth place remained empty. None of the other standbys could afford it.

The passengers were filing aboard. One of them—a short, stout, dark-haired, well-dressed Irishman carrying a symbol-decorated carpetbag in one hand and a suitcase in the other, and bearing papers which identified him as Seamus Kilpadraeg, Master Sorcerer—watched the other passengers carefully without seeming to do so. The man just ahead of him in line was a wide-shouldered, thick-set man with graying hair who announced himself as Sir Stanley Galbraith. He climbed aboard and did not look back as Master Seamus identified himself, put down his suitcase, surrendered his ticket, and took back his stub.

The man behind him, the last in line, was a tall, lean gentleman with brown hair and a full, bushy brown beard. Master Seamus had previously watched him hurrying across the station toward the train. He carried a suitcase in one hand and a silver-headed walking stick in the other, and walked with a slight limp.

The sorcerer heard him give his name to the ticket officer as Goodman John Peabody.

Master Seamus knew that the limp was phony and that the walking stick concealed a sword, but he said nothing and did not look back as he picked up his suitcase and boarded the train.

The small lounge at the rear of the car already contained some five or six passengers. The rest were presumably in their compartments. His own compartment, according to his ticket, was Number Two, towards the front of the car. He headed toward it, suitcase in one hand, carpetbag in the other. He looked again at the ticket: Number Two Upper. The lower bed was now a day couch, the upper had been folded up into the wall and locked into place, but there were two lockers under the lower bed marked "Upper" and "Lower". The one marked "Upper" still had a key in its lock; the other did not, which meant that the man who shared his compartment had already put his luggage in, locked it, and taken the key. Master Seamus stowed his own gear away, locked the locker, and pocketed the key. Having nothing better to do, he went back to the lounge.

The bushy-bearded man named Peabody was seated by himself over in one corner reading the *Paris Standard*. After one glance, the sorcerer ignored him, found himself a seat, and looked casually around at the others.

They seemed a mixed lot, some tall, some short, some middle-aged, some not much over thirty. The youngest-appearing was a blond, pink-faced fellow who was standing by the bar as if impatiently awaiting a drink, although he must have known that liquor would not be served until the train was well under way.

The oldest-appearing was a white-haired gentleman in priest's garb; he had a small white mustache and beard, and smooth-shaven cheeks. He was quietly reading his breviary through a pair of gold-rimmed half-glasses.

Between those two, there seemed to be a sampling of every decade. There were only nine men in the lounge, including the sorcerer. Five others, for one reason or another, remained in their compartments. The last one almost didn't make it.

He was a plump man—not really fat, but definitely overweight—who came puffing up just as the ticket officer was about to close the door. He clutched his suitcase in one hand and his hat in the other. His sandy hair had been tousled by the warm spring wind.

"Quinte," he gasped. "Jason Quinte." He handed over his ticket,

retaining the stub.

The ticket officer said, "Glad you made it, sir. That's all, then." And he closed the door.

Two minutes later, the train began to move.

III

Five minutes out of the station, a man in a bright red-and-blue uniform came into the car and asked those who were in their staterooms to please assemble in the after lounge. "The Trainmaster will be here in a moment," he informed everyone.

In due time, the Trainmaster made his appearance in the lounge. He was a man of medium height, with a fierce-looking black mustache, and when he doffed his hat, he revealed a vast expanse of bald head fringed by black hair. His red-and-blue uniform was distinguished from the other by four broad white stripes on each sleeve.

"Gentlemen," he said with a slight bow, "I am Edmund Norton, your Trainmaster. I see by the passenger manifest that all of you are going straight through to Napoli. The timetable is printed on the little cards inside the doors of your compartments, and another one—" he gestured "—is posted over there behind the bar. Our first stop will be Lyon, where we will arrive at 12:15 this afternoon, and there will be an hour stopover. There is an excellent restaurant at the station for your lunch. We arrive at Marseille at 6:24 and will leave at 7:20. There will be a light supper served in the dining car at nine.

"At approximately half an hour after midnight, we will cross the border from the Duchy of Provence to the Duchy of Liguria. The train will stop for ten minutes, but you need not bother yourselves with that, as no one will be allowed either on or off the train. We will arrive at Genova at 3:31 in the morning, and leave at 4:30. Breakfast will be served from 8 to 9 in the morning, and we arrive in Rome at four minutes before noon. We leave Rome at one o'clock, which will give you an hour for lunch. And we arrive at Napoli at 3:26 in the afternoon. The total time for the trip will be 34 hours and 14 minutes.

"For your convenience, the dining car will be open this morning at six. It is the next car ahead, toward the front of the train.

"Goodman Fred will take care of all of your needs, but feel free to call on me for anything at any time." Goodman Fred made a short bow.

"I must remind you, gentlemen, that smoking is not permitted

in the compartments, in the corridor, or in the lounge. Those of you who wish to smoke may use the observation platform at the rear of the car.

"If there are any questions, I will be glad to answer them at this time."

There were no questions. The Trainmaster bowed again. "Thank you, gentlemen. I hope you will all enjoy your trip." He replaced his hat, turned, and left.

There were four tables reserved in the rear of the dining car for the occupants of the observation car. Master Sorcerer Seamus Kilpadraeg got into the dining car early, and one by one, three other men sat down with him at the table.

The tall, husky man with the receding white hair and the white, clipped, military mustache introduced himself first.

"Name's Martyn Boothroyd. Looks like we're going to be on the train together for a while, eh?" His attention was all on the sorcerer.

"So it would seem, Goodman Martyn," the stout little Irish sorcerer said affably. "Seamus Kilpadraeg I am, and pleased to meet you."

The blocky-faced man with the two-inch scar on his right cheek was Gavin Tailleir; the blond man with the big nose was Sidney Charpentier.

The waiter came, took orders, and went.

Charpentier rubbed a forefinger against the side of his imposing nose. "Pardon me, Goodman Seamus," he said in his deep, rumbling voice, "but when you came aboard, didn't I see you carrying a magician's bag?"

"You did, sir," said the sorcerer pleasantly.

Charpentier grinned, showing strong white teeth. "Thought so. Journeyman? Or should I have called you 'Master Seamus'?"

The Irishman smiled back. "Master it is, sir."

All of them were speaking rather loudly, and around them others were doing the same, trying to adjust their voice levels to compensate for the roar and rumble of the *Napoli Express* as she sped southwards towards Lyon.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Seamus," Charpentier said. "I've always been interested in the field of magic. Sometimes wish I'd gone into it, myself. Never have made Master, though; math's way over my head."

"Oh? You've a touch of the Talent, then?" the sorcerer asked.

"A little. I've got my ticket as a Lay Healer."

The sorcerer nodded. A Lay Healer's License was good for first aid and emergency work or for assisting a qualified Healer.

The blocky-faced Tailleur tapped the scar on his cheek with his right forefinger and said, in a somewhat gravelly voice: "This would've been a damn sight worse than it is if it hadn't been for old Sharpy, here."

Boothroyd said suddenly: "There's a question I've always wanted to ask—oops, here's breakfast." While the waiter put plates of hot food on the table, Boothroyd began again. "There's a question I've always wanted to ask. I've noticed that Healers use only their hands, with perhaps a little oil or water, but sorcerers use all kinds of paraphernalia—wands, amulets, thuribles, that sort of thing. Why is that?"

"Well, sir, for one thing, they're slightly different uses of the Talent," the sorcerer said. "A Healer is assisting in a process that naturally tends in the direction he wants it to go. The body itself has a strong tendency to heal. Furthermore, the *patient* wants it to heal, except in certain cases of severe aberration, which a Healer can take care of in other ways."

"In other words," Charpentier said, "the Healer has the co-operation of both the body and the mind of the patient."

"Exactly so," the sorcerer agreed. "The Healer just greases the skids, so to speak."

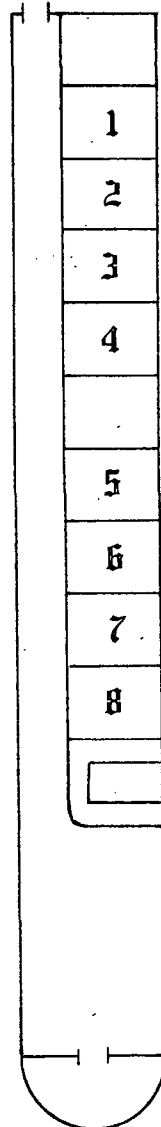
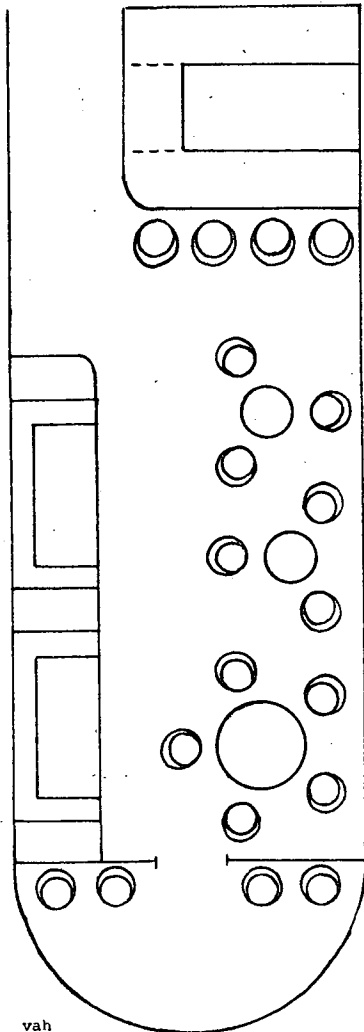
"And how does that differ from what a sorcerer does?" Boothroyd asked.

"Well, most of a sorcerer's work is done with inanimate objects. No cooperation at all, d'ye see. So he has to use tools that a Healer doesn't need.

"I'll give you an analogy. Suppose you have two friends who weigh fourteen stone apiece. Suppose they're both very drunk and want to go home. But they are so drunk that they can't get home by themselves. You, who are perfectly sober, can take 'em both by the arm and lead 'em both home at the same time. It may be a bit o' trouble; it may require all your skill at handling 'em. But you can do it without help because, in the long run, they're co-operating with you. They *want* to get home.

"But suppose you had the same weight in two sandbags, and you want to get *them* to the same place at the same time. You'll get no co-operation from three hundred and ninety-two pounds of sand. So you have to use a tool to assist you. You have a great many tools, but you must pick the right one for the job. In this case, you'd use a wheelbarrow, not a screwdriver or a hammer."

Observation Car of the Napoli Express



- UTILITY ROOM
- 1 JOHN PEABODY
- 2 FATHER ARMAND BRUN
MASTER SEAMUS KILPADRAEG
- 3 MAURICE ZEISLER
SIDNEY CHARPENTIER
- 4 MARTYN BOOTHROYD
GAVIN TAILLEUX
- TOILET
- 5 SIMON LAMAR
ARTHUR MAC KAY
- 6 VALENTINE HERRICK
CHARLES JAMIESON
- 7 JASON QUINTE
LYMAN VANDEPOLE
- 8 SIR STANLEY GALBRAITH
GWILIAM HAUSER
- BAR
- LOUNGE —
(DETAIL AT LEFT)
- OBSERVATION DECK

"Oh, I see," said Boothroyd. "You'd say a healer's job was easier, then?"

"Not easier. Just different. Some men who could wheel twenty-eight stone of sand a mile in fifteen minutes might not be able to handle a couple of drunks at all without using physical force. It's a different approach, you see."

Master Seamus had let his eyes wander over the other men in the rear of the dining car as he talked. There were only fourteen men at breakfast. The white-haired priest was listening to two rather foppish-looking men discourse earnestly on church architecture at the next table. He couldn't hear any of the others because of the noise of the train. Only one man was missing. Apparently the bushy-bearded Goodman John Peabody had not wanted any breakfast.

IV

The saba game started early.

An imposing man with a hawk nose and a full beard, completely white except for two narrow streaks of dark brown beginning at the corners of his mouth, came over to where Master Seamus was sitting in the lounge.

"Master Seamus, I'm Gwiliam Hauser. A few of us are getting up a little game and thought maybe you'd like to join us."

"I thank you for the offer, Goodman Gwiliam," the sorcerer said, "but I'm afraid I'm not much of a gambling man."

"Hardly gambling, sir. Twelfth-bit ante. Just a friendly game to pass the time."

"No, not even a friendly game of saba. But, again, I thank you." Hauser's eyes narrowed. "May I ask why not?"

"Ah, that you may, sir, and I'll tell you. If a sorcerer gets in a saba game with men who don't have the Talent, he can only lose."

"And why is that?"

"Because if he wins, sir, there's sure to be someone at the table who will accuse him of using his Talent to cheat. Now you should see a saba game played among sorcerers, sir. That's something to watch, though likely you'd not see most of what was going on."

Hauser's eyes cleared, and a chuckle came from somewhere inside the heavy beard. "I see. Hadn't thought of it that way. Boothroyd said you might like to play, so I asked. I'll pass on your bit of wisdom to him."

Actually, it would never occur to most folk to distrust a magician, much less accuse one of cheating at cards. But a heavy loser,

especially if he's been drinking, will quite often say things he regrets later. Sorcerers rarely gamble with unTalented people unless they are close friends.

Eventually Hauser, Boothroyd, Charpentier, the plump, nearly-late Jason Quinte, and one of the two fops—the tall one with the hairline mustache, who looked as though he had been pressed into his clothes—ended up at a corner table with a deck of cards and a round of drinks. The saba game was on.

The sorcerer watched the game for a while from across the room, then opened the copy of the *Journal of the Royal Thaumaturgical Society* and began to read.

At eight-fifteen, the Irish magician finished the article on "The Subjective Algebra of Kinetic Processes" and put the *Journal* down. He was tired, not having had enough sleep, and the swaying motion of the train made it difficult to keep his eyes focused on the lines of print. He closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

"Beg y'pardon, Master Seamus. Mind if I join you?"

The sorcerer opened his eyes and looked up.

"Not at all. Pray sit down."

The man had reddish hair, a bulbous nose, and sagging features that hung loosely on his facial bones. His smile was pleasant and his eyes sleepy-looking. "Zeisler's my name, Master Seamus. Maurice Zeisler." He extended his right hand; his left held a large glass of ouiskie and water—heavy on the ouiskie.

The two shook hands, and Zeisler eased himself into the chair to the sorcerer's left. He gestured toward the saba table.

"Damn silly game, saba. Have to remember all those cards. Miss one, play wrong, and you're down the drain for a sovereign at least. Remember 'em all, have all the luck, bluff all the others out, and you're four sovereigns ahead. I never get the luck, and I can't keep the cards straight. Vandepole can, every time. So I stand 'em all a round of drinks and let 'em play. Lose less that way."

"Very wise," murmured the sorcerer.

"Buy you a drink?"

"No, thank you, sir. It's a bit early for me. Later, perhaps."

"Certainly. Be a pleasure." He took a hefty swig from his glass and then leaned confidentially toward the sorcerer. "What I would really like to know is, is Vandepole cheating? He's the well-dressed chap with the hairline mustache. Is he using the Talent to influence the fall of the cards?"

The sorcerer didn't even glance at the saba table. "Are you consulting me professionally, sir?" he asked in a mild voice.

Zeisler blinked. "Well, I—"

"Because, if you are," Master Seamus continued relentlessly, "I must warn you that a Master's fees come quite high. I would suggest you consult a Journeyman Sorcerer for that sort of thing; his fees would be much lower than mine, and he'd give you the same information."

"Oh. Well. Thank you. I may do that. Thank you." He took another long pull at his drink. "Uh—by the bye, do you happen to know a Master Sorcerer named Sean O Lochlainn?"

The sorcerer nodded slowly. "I've met him," he said carefully.

"Fortunate. Never met him, myself, but I've heard a great deal about him. Forensic sorcerer, you know. Interesting work. Like to meet him sometime." His eyes had wandered away from the sorcerer as he spoke, and he was gazing out the window at the French countryside flowing by.

"You're interested in magic, then?" the Irishman asked.

Zeisler's eyes came back. "Magic? Oh, no. Got no Talent at all. No, what I'm interested in is investigative work. Criminal investigation." He blinked and frowned as though trying to remember something. Then his eyes brightened and he said: "Reason I brought up Master Sean was that I met the man he works for, Lord Darcy, who's the Chief Investigator for His Royal Highness, the Duke of Normandy." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. The ouiskie was strong on his breath. "Were you at the Healers' and Sorcerers' Convention in London some years back, when a sorcerer named Zwinge got murdered at the Royal Steward Hotel?"

"I was there," the sorcerer said. "I remember it well."

"I imagine so, yes. Well, I was attached to the Admiralty offices at the time. Met Darcy there." He winked an eye solemnly. "Helped him crack the case, actually, but I can't say anything more about it than that." His gaze went back out the window again. "Great investigator. Absolute genius in his field. Nobody else could crack that case, but he solved it in no time. Absolute genius. Wish I had his brains." He drained his glass. "Yes, sir, I wish I had his brains." He looked at his empty glass and stood up. "Time for a refill. Get you one?"

"Not yet. Later, perhaps."

"Be right back." Zeisler headed for the bar.

He did not come back. He got into a conversation with Fred, the

attendant who was mixing drinks, and forgot about Master Seamus completely, for which the stout little Irish sorcerer was extremely grateful.

He noticed John Peabody, he of the full and bushy beard, was sitting alone at the far end of the long couch, apparently still reading his newspaper, and seemingly so thoroughly engrossed in it that it would be boorish for anyone to speak to him. But the sorcerer knew that the man was keeping at least a part of his attention on the long hallway that ran forward, past the compartments.

Master Seamus looked back at the saba game. The foppishly dressed man with the hairline mustache was raking in sizeable winnings.

If Vandepole were cheating, he was doing it without the aid of the Talent, either latent or conscious; such usage of the Talent would have been easy for the sorcerer to pick up at this short range. It was possible, of course, that the man had a touch of the precognitive Talent, but that was something which the science of magic had, as yet, little data and no theory on. Someone, some day, might solve the problem of the asymmetry of time, but no one had done it yet, and even the relatively new mathematics of the subjective algebrae offered no clue.

The sorcerer shrugged and picked up his *Journal* again. What the hell, it was no business of his.

V

"*Lyon, gentlemen!*" came Goodman Fred's voice across the lounge, fighting successfully against the noise of the train. "*Lyon in fifteen minutes! The bar will close in five minutes! Lunch will be served in the station restaurant, and we will leave at one-fifteen! It is now twelve noon!*"

Fred had everyone's attention now, so he repeated the message.

Not everyone was in the lounge. After the bar was closed—Zeisler had managed to get two more during the five minutes—Fred went forward along the passageway and knocked on each compartment door. "*Lyon in ten minutes! Lunch will be served in the station restaurant. We will leave for Marseille at 1:15.*"

The stout little Irish sorcerer turned in his couch to look out the window at the outskirts of Lyon. It was a pleasant place, he thought. The Rhone valley was famous for its viniculture, but now the grape arbors were giving way to cottages more and more densely packed, and finally the train was in the city itself. The

houses were old, most of them, but neat and well-tended. Technically, the County of Lyonnais was a part of the Duchy of Burgundy, but the folk never thought of themselves as Burgundians. The Count de Lyonnais commanded their respect far more than the Duke of Burgundy did. His Grace-respected those feelings, and allowed My Lord Count as free a hand as the King's Law would permit. From the looks of the countryside, it appeared My Lord Count did a pretty good job.

"Excuse me, Master Sorcerer," said a soft, pleasant voice.

He turned away from the window. It was the elderly-looking gentleman in clerical garb. "How may I help you, Father?"

"Allow me to introduce myself; I am the Reverend Father Armand Brun. I noticed you sitting here by yourself, and I wondered if you would care to join me and some other gentlemen for lunch."

"Master Seamus Kilpadraeg at your service, Reverend Sir. I'd be most happy to join you for lunch. We have an hour, it seems."

The "other gentlemen" were standing near the bar, and were introduced in that quiet, smooth voice. Simon Lamar had thinning dark hair that one could see his scalp through, a long face, and lips that were drawn into a thin line. His voice was flat, with just a touch of Yorkshire in it as he said: "I'm pleased to meet you, Master Seamus."

Arthur Mac Kay's accent was both Oxford and Oxfordshire, and was smooth and well-modulated, like an actor's. He was the other foppishly dressed man—immaculate, as though his clothes had been pressed seconds before. He had dark, thick, slightly wavy hair, luminous brown eyes surrounded by long, dark lashes, and a handsome face that matched. He was almost too pretty.

Valentine Herrick had flaming red hair, an excessively toothy smile, and a body that seemed to radiate health and strength as he shook the sorcerer's hand. "Hate to see a man eat alone, by S'n George! A meal's not a meal without company, is it?"

"Not really," the sorcerer agreed.

"Especially at these train station restaurants," said Lamar in his flat voice. "Company keeps your mind off the tasteless food."

Mac Kay smiled angelically. "Oh, come; it's not as bad as all that. Come along; you'll see."

The Heart of Lyon restaurant was a fairly comfortable-looking place, not more than fifty years old, but designed in the King Dwilliam IV style of the late eighteenth century to give it an air of stability. The decor, however, reflected a mild pun on the restaurant's name—which had probably been carefully chosen for just

that reason. Over the door, three-quarters life size, legs braced apart, right hand on the pommel of a great naked sword whose point touched the lintel, left arm holding a shield bearing the lions of England, stood the helmed, mail-clad figure of King Richard the Lion-Hearted in polychromed bas-relief. The interior, too, was decorated with knights and ladies of the time of Richard I.

It was fitting. Although most of the first ten years of his reign had been spent in the noble and heroic, but foolish and expensive, fighting of the Third Crusade, he had settled down after his near-fatal wound at the siege of Chaluz to become a really effective ruler. There were some historians who claimed that if Richard had died at Chaluz, a Capet would now be sitting on the throne of the Anglo-French Empire instead of a Plantagenet. But the Capets had died out long ago, as had the unstable cadet branch of the Plantagenets descended from the exiled Prince John, Richard's younger brother. It was Richard and Arthur, the nephew who had succeeded him in 1219, who had held the Anglo-French nation together during those troubled times, and it had been the descendants of King Arthur who had kept it stable through seven and a half centuries.

Old Richard may have had his faults, but he had been a fine king.

"Interesting motif for the decorations," Father Armand said as the waiter led the five men to a table. "And very well done, too."

"Not period, though," Lamar said flatly. "Too realistic."

"Oh, true, true," Father Armand said agreeably. "Not early thirteenth century style at all." He seated himself as the waiter pulled out a chair for him. "It's the painstakingly detailed realism of the late seventeenth, which fits in very well with the style of the rest of the interior. It must have been expensive; there are very few artists nowadays who can or will do that sort of work."

"Agreed, Father," said Lamar. "Workmanship in general isn't what it used to be."

Father Armand chose to ignore that remark. "Now, you take a look up there, at Gwiliam the Marshal—at least I presume it's he; he's wearing the Marshal arms on his surcoat. I'll wager that if you climbed up there on a stepladder and looked closely, you could see the tiny rivets in every link of his mail."

Lamar raised a finger. "And that's not period, either."

Father Armand looked astonished. "Riveted link mail not period for the thirteenth century? Surely, sir—"

"No, no," Lamar interrupted hastily. "I meant the surcoat with the Marshal arms. Armorial bearings of that sort didn't come in till about a century later."

"You know," said Arthur Mac Kay suddenly, "I've always wondered what I'd look like in one of those outfits. Rather dashing, I think." His actor's voice contrasted strongly with Lamar's flat tones.

Valentine Herrick looked at him, smiling toothily. "Hey! Wouldn't that be great? Imagine! Charging into combat with a broadsword like that! Or rescuing a fair princess! Or slaying a dragon! Or a wicked magician!" He stopped suddenly and actually blushed. "Oops. Sorry, Master Sorcerer."

"That's all right," said Master Seamus mildly. "You may slay all the *wicked* magicians you like. Just don't make any mistakes."

That got a chuckle from everyone, even Herrick.

They looked over their menus, chose and ordered. The food, which the sorcerer thought quite good, came very quickly. Father Armand said grace, and more small talk ensued. Lamar said little about the food, but the wine was not to his exact taste.

"It's a Delacey '69, from just south of Givors. Not a bad year for the reds, but it can't compare with the Monet '69, from a lovely little place a few miles southeast of Beaune."

Mac Kay lifted his glass and seemed to address his remarks to it. "You know, I have always contended that the true connoisseur is to be pitied, for he has trained his taste to such perfection that he enjoys almost nothing. It is, I believe, a corollary of Acipenser's Law, or perhaps a theorem derived therefrom."

Herrick blinked bright blue eyes at him. "What? I don't know what you're talking about, but, by S'n George, I think it's damn good wine." He emphasized his point by draining his glass and refilling it from the carafe.

Almost as if he had heard the pouring as a summons, Maurice Zeisler came wandering over to the table. He did not stagger, but there was a controlled precision about his walking and about his speech that indicated a necessity to concentrate in order to do either one properly. He did not sit down.

"Hullo, fellows," he said very carefully. "Did you see who's over in the corner?" There were, of course, four corners to the big room, but a slight motion of his head indicated which one he meant.

It was bushy-bearded John Peabody, eating by himself, his suitcase on the floor beside his chair.

"What about him?" asked Lamar sourly.

"Know him?"

"No. Kept pretty much to himself. Why?"

"I dunno. Seems familiar, somehow. Like I ought to know him. Can't exactly place him, though. Oh, well." And he wandered off again, back towards the bar, whence he had come.

"Condition he's in, he wouldn't recognize his own mother," muttered Lamar. "Pass the wine, please."

VI

The *Napoli Express* crossed the Rhone at Lyon and headed southwards through the Duchy of Dauphine, toward the Duchy of Provence, following the river valley. At Avignon, it would angle away from the river, southeast toward Marseille, but that wouldn't be until nearly five o'clock.

The *Napoli Express* was not a high-speed train; it was too long and too heavy. But it made up for that by making only four stops between Paris and Napoli. Five, if you counted the very short stop at the Provence-Liguria border.

In order to avoid having to cross the Maritime Alps, the train's route ran along the coast of the Mediterranean after leaving Marseille, past Toulon, Canne, Nice, and Monaco to the Ligurian coast. It looped around the Gulf of Genova to the city of Genova, then stayed with the seacoast all the way to the Tiber, where it turned east to make the short side trip to Rome. There, it crossed the Tiber and headed back toward the sea, staying with the coast all the way to arrive at last at Napoli.

But that would be tomorrow afternoon. There were hundreds of miles and hours of time ahead of her yet.

Master Seamus sat on one of the chairs on the observation deck at the rear of the car and watched the Rhone Valley retreat into the distance. There were four seats on the semicircular observation deck, two on each side of the central door that led into the lounge. The two on the starboard side were occupied by the plump, sandy-haired man who had almost missed the train—Jason Quinte—and the blond, pink-faced young man whose name the sorcerer did not know. Both were smoking cigars and talking in voices that could be heard but not understood above the rush of the wind and the rumble of the wheels over the steel tracks.

Master Seamus had taken the outer of the two remaining chairs, and Father Armand, who was trying valiantly to light his pipe in the gusts that eddied about him, had taken the other.

When at last the pipe was burning properly, Father Armand leaned back and relaxed.

The door slid open and a fifth man came out, thumbing tobacco into his own pipe, a stubby briar. It was Sir Stanley Galbraith, the wide-shouldered, muscular, graying man who had preceded the sorcerer aboard the train. He ignored the others and went to the high railing that surrounded the observation deck and looked into the distance. Having packed his pipe to his satisfaction, he put away his tobacco pouch and then proceeded to search himself. Finally, he turned around, scowling. The scowl vanished when he saw Father Armand's pipe.

"Ah. Begging your pardon, Reverend Sir, but could I borrow your pipe lighter? Seem to have left my own in my compartment."

"Certainly." Father Armand proffered his lighter, which Sir Stanley promptly made use of. He succeeded in an astonishingly short time and handed the lighter back. "Thank you. My name's Galbraith, Sir Stanley Galbraith."

"Father Armand Brun. I am pleased to meet you, Sir Stanley. This is Master Sorcerer Seamus Kilpadraeg."

"A pleasure, gentlemen, a pleasure." He puffed vigorously at his pipe. "There. She'll stay lit now. Good thing it isn't raining; left my weather pipe at home."

"If you need one, Sir Stanley, let me know." It was the plump Jason Quinte. He and the pink-faced youngster had stopped talking when Sir Stanley had appeared and had been listening. Sir Stanley's voice was not overly loud, but it carried well. "I have a couple of them," Quinte went on. "One of 'em never used. Glad to make you a present of it if you want it."

"No, no. Thanks all the same, but there's no bad weather predicted between here and Napoli." He looked at the sorcerer. "Isn't that right, Master Seamus?"

The sorcerer grinned. "That's what the report said, Sir Stanley, but I couldn't tell you of my own knowledge. Weather magic isn't my field."

"Oh. Sorry. You chaps do all specialize, don't you? What is your specialty, if I may ask?"

"I teach forensic sorcery."

"Ah, I see. Interesting field, no doubt." He shifted his attention as a whiff of smoke came his way. "Jamieson."

The pink-faced youth took the cigar from his mouth and looked alert. "Sir?"

"What the devil is that you're smoking?"

Jamieson looked down at the cigar in his hand as though he were wondering where the thing had come from and how it had got there. "A Hashtpar, sir."

"Persian tobacco; I thought so." A smile came over his tanned face. "Good Persian is very good; bad Persian—which that is—will probably rot your lungs, my boy. That particular type is cured with some sort of perfume or incense. Reminds me of a whorehouse in Abadan."

There was a sudden awkward pause as it came to the minds of all of them that there was a man of the cloth present.

"Toss it overboard, Jamie," Quinte said in a rather-too-loud voice. "Here, have one of mine."

Jamieson looked at the three-quarters-smoked cigar again, then flipped it over the rail. "No, thanks, Jason. I was through with it anyway. Just thought I'd try one." He looked up at Sir Stanley with a rather sheepish grin. "They were expensive, sir, so I bought one. Just to try it, you see. But you're right—they do smell like the inside of a—uh—Daoist temple."

Sir Stanley chuckled. "Some of the worst habits are the most expensive, son. But, then, so are some of the best."

"What are you smoking, Sir Stanley?" Father Armand asked quietly.



"This? It's a blend of Balik and Robertian."

"I favor a similar blend, myself. I find Balik the best of Turkish. I alternate with another blend: Balik and Couban."

Sir Stanley shook his head slowly. "Tobacco from the Duchy of Couba is much better suited for cigars, Reverend Sir. The Duchy of Robertia produces the finer pipe tobacco, I find. Of course, I'll admit it's all a matter of taste."

"Never seen Couba," said Quinte, "but I've seen the tobacco fields in Robertia. Don't know if you've ever seen the stuff grow, Father?" It was only half a question.

"Tell me about it," said Father Armand.

Robertia was a duchy on the southern coast of the northern continent of the Western Hemisphere, New England, with a seacoast on the Gulf of Mechicoe. It had been named after Robert II, since it had been founded during his reign in the early eighteenth century.

"It grows about so high," Quinte said, holding his hand about thirty inches off the deck. "Big, wide leaves. I don't know how it's cured; I only saw it in the fields."

He may have been going to say more, but the door leading into the lounge slid open and Trainmaster Edmund Norton stepped out, his red-and-blue uniform gleaming in the afternoon sun.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said with a smile. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Oh, no," said Sir Stanley. "Not at all. Just chit-chat."

"I hope you gentlemen have all been comfortable, enjoying the trip, eh?"

"No complaints at all, Trainmaster. Eh, Father?"

"Oh, none at all, none at all," said Father Armand. "A very enjoyable trip so far. You run an excellent train, Trainmaster."

"Thank you, Reverend Sir." The Trainmaster cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, it is my custom at this hour to invite all my special passengers to join me in a drink—of whatever kind you prefer. Will you join me, gentlemen?"

There could, of course, be no argument with an invitation like that. The five passengers followed the Trainmaster into the lounge.

"One thing I'll say," Father Armand murmured to the sorcerer, "It's certainly quieter in here than out there."

The Trainmaster went quietly over to the table where the saba game had resumed after lunch. He had judged his time accurately.

Vandepole raked in his winnings with one hand, while he ran the forefinger of the other across his hairline mustache.

The Trainmaster said a few words, which the sorcerer did not hear over the rumble of the train. It was quieter in here, yes, but not exactly silent.

Then Trainmaster Edmund went over to the bar, where Goodman Fred stood waiting, turned to the passengers and said in a loud voice: "Gentlemen, step up and order your pleasure. Fred, I'll see what the gentlemen at the saba table will have."

A few minutes later, the Irish sorcerer was seated at the bar watching the foam on a glass of beer slosh gently from side to side with the swaying of train. Maurice Zeisler, he thought, was going to hate himself later. The scar-faced Gavin Tailleux had gone back to his compartment to tell him that the Trainmaster was treating, but had been unable to rouse him from his—er—nap.

Master Seamus was seated at the end of the bar, near the passageway. The Trainmaster came over and stood at the end of the bar after making sure everyone who wanted one had been served a drink.

"I'll have a beer, Fred," he said to the attendant.

"Comin' right up, Trainmaster."

"I see beer's your tippie, too, Master Sorcerer," Trainmaster Edmund said as Fred put a foaming brew before him.

"Aye, Trainmaster, that it is. Wine's good with a meal, and a brandy for special occasions is fine, but for casual or even serious drinkin', I'll take beer every time."

"Well spoken. Do you like this particular brew?"

"Very much," said the sorcerer. "Norman, isn't it?"

"Yes. There's a little area in the Duchy of Normandy, up in the highlands where the Orne, the Sarthe, the Eure, the Risle, and the Mayenne all have their sources, that has the best water in all of France. There's a good beer comes from Ireland, and there are those who prefer English beer, but to my taste, Norman is the best, which is why I always order it for my train."

Master Seamus, who *did* prefer English beer, but by the merest hair, merely said: "It's very fine stuff. Very fine, indeed." He suspected that the Trainmaster's preference might be shaded just a little by the fact that Norman beer was cheaper in Paris than English beer.

"Have you been getting along well with your compartment mate?" the Trainmaster asked.

"I haven't been informed who my compartment mate is," the

sorcerer replied.

"Oh? Sorry. It's Father Armand Brun."

VII

By half-past four that afternoon, Master Seamus Kilpadraeg was dozing on the rearward couch, leaning back in the corner, his arms folded across his chest and his chin nearly touching his sternum. Since he did not snore, he offended no one. Father Armand had gone back to Compartment Number Two at a quarter after three, and, suspecting that the gentleman was tired, the sorcerer had decided to let him have the day couch there to himself.

The train and the saba game went on. Jason Quinte had dropped out of the game, but his place had been taken by the red-haired Valentine Herrick. Gavin Tailleur had taken Sidney Charpentier's place, and now Charpentier was sitting on the forward couch, his large nose buried in a book entitled *The Infernal Device*, an adventure novel. Sir Stanley Galbraith and Arthur Mac Kay were at the bar with a dice cup, playing for drinks.

Quinte and young Jamieson were back out on the observation deck with more cigars—presumably not Hashtpars this time.

Zeisler was still snoozing, and Lamar had apparently retired to his own compartment.

At Avignon, the train crossed the bridge that spanned the River Durance and curved away from the Rhone toward Marseille.

Master Seamus was roused from his doze by the sound of Simon Lamar's flat voice, but he neither opened his eyes nor lifted his head.

"Sidney," Lamar said to Charpentier, "I need your Healing Talent."

"What's the matter? Got a headache?"

"I don't mean *I* need it. Maurice does. He's got one hell of a hangover. I've ordered some caffe from Fred, but I'd like your help. He hasn't eaten all day, and he has a headache."

"Right. I'll come along. We'll have to get some food in him at Marseille." He rose and left with Lamar.

The sorcerer dozed off again.

VIII

When the *Napoli Express* pulled into Marseille at twenty-four minutes after six that evening, Master Seamus had already decided that he needed exercise before he needed food. He got off the train, went through the depot, and out into the street beyond. A

brisk fifteen-minute walk got his blood going again, made him feel less drowsy, and whetted his appetite. The tangy air of the Duchy of Provence, given a touch of piquancy by the breeze from the Mediterranean, was an aperitif in itself.

The Cannebiere restaurant—which was nowhere near the street of the same name—was crowded by the time the sorcerer got back. With apologies to both sides, the waiter seated him at a table with a middle-aged couple named Duprey. Since he was not carrying his symbol-decorated carpetbag, there was no way for them to know that he was a magician, and he saw no reason to enlighten them.

He ordered the specialty of the house, which turned out to be a delicious, thick whitefish stew with lots of garlic. It went well with a dry white wine of rather pronounced character.

The Dupreys, as the conversation brought out, were the owners of a small leather-goods shop in Versaille who had carefully saved their money to make a trip to Rome, where they would spend a week, leaving the business in the hands of their two sons, each of whom was married to a delightful wife, and one of them had two daughters and the other a son, and. . .

And so on.

The sorcerer was not bored. He liked people, and the Dupreys were a very pleasant couple. He didn't have to talk much, and they asked him no questions. Not, that is, until the *caffe* was served. Then: "Tell me, Goodman Seamus," said the man, "why is it that we must stop at the Ligurian border tonight?"

"To check the bill-of-lading for the freight cars, I believe," the sorcerer said. "Some Italian law about certain imports."

"You see, John-Paul," said the woman, "it is as I told you."

"Yes, Martine, but I do not see why it should be. We are not stopped at the border of Champagne or Burgundy or Dauphine or Provence. Why Liguria?" He looked back at the magician. "Are we not all a part of the same Empire?"

"Well, yes—and no," Master Seamus said thoughtfully.

"What can you mean by that, sir?" John-Paul said, looking puzzled.

"Well, the Duchies of Italy, like the Duchies of Germany, are a part of the *Holy Roman Empire*, d'ye see, which was established in A.D. 862, and King John IV is Emperor. But they are *not* a part of what is unofficially called the *Anglo-French Empire*, which technically includes only France, England, Scotland, and Ireland."

"But we all have the same Emperor, don't we?" Martine asked.

"Yes, but His Majesty's duties are different, d'ye see. The Italian States have their own Parliament, which meets in Rome, and the laws they have passed are slightly different than those of the Anglo-French Empire. Its acts are ratified, not by the Emperor directly, but by the Imperial Viceroy, Prince Roberto VII. In Italy, the Emperor reigns, but does not rule, d'ye see."

"I—I think so," John-Paul said hesitantly. "Is it the same in the Germanies? I mean, they're part of the Empire, too."

"Not quite the same. They're not as unified as the Duchies of Italy. Some of them take the title of Prince, and some would like to take the title of King, though that's forbidden by the Concordat of Magdeburg. But the general idea's the same. You might say that we're all different states, but with the same goals, under the same Emperor. We all want individual freedom, peace, prosperity, and happy homes. And the Emporor is the living symbol of those goals for all of us."

After a moment's silence, Martine said: "Goodness! That's very poetic, Goodman Seamus!"

"It still seems silly," John-Paul said doggedly, "to have to stop a train at the border between two Imperial Duchies."

Master Seamus sighed. "You should try visiting the Poles—or even the Magyars," he said. "The delay might be as much as two hours. You would have to have a passport. The train would be searched. Your luggage would be searched. Even *you* might be searched. And the Poles do that even when their own people are crossing their own internal borders."

"Well!" said Martine, "I certainly shan't ever go *there*!"

"No need to worry about that," said John-Paul. "Will you have more caffe, my dear?"

Master Seamus went back to the train feeling very relaxed, thankful that two very ordinary people had taken his mind off his troubles. He never saw nor heard of either of them again.

IX

By eight o'clock that evening, the *Napoli Express* was nearly twenty-five miles out of Marseille, headed for a rendezvous with the Ligurian border.

The saba game was in full swing again, and Master Seamus had the private feeling that, if it weren't for the fact that no one was permitted in the lounge while the train was in the station, three or four of the die-hards would never have bothered to eat.

By that time, the sorcerer found his eyelids getting heavy

again. Since Father Armand was in deep conversation with two other passengers, Master Seamus decided he might as well go back to the compartment and take his turn on the day couch. He dropped off to sleep almost immediately.

The sorcerer's inward clock told him that it was ten minutes of nine when a rap sounded at the door.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Fred, sir. Time to make up the bed, sir."

Wake up, it's time to go to sleep, the sorcerer thought glumly as he got his feet on the floor. "Certainly, Fred; come in."

"Sorry, sir, but the beds have to be made before I go off at nine. The night man doesn't have the keys, you see."

"Certainly; that's all right. I had me little nap, and I feel much better. I'll go on out to the lounge and let you work; there's hardly room in here for two of us."

"That's true, sir; thank you, sir."

There was a new man on behind the bar. As the sorcerer sat down, he put down the glass he was polishing and came over.

"May I serve you, sir?"

"Indeed you may, me lad. A beer, if you please."

"One beer; yes, sir." He took a pint mug, filled it, and served it.

There was no one else at the bar. The saba game, like the constellations in the sky, seemed unchanged. Master Seamus entertained a brief fantasy of taking this same trip a hundred years hence and seeing nothing remarkably different about that saba game. (Young Jamieson had replaced Boothroyd, but Hauser, Tailleur, Herrick, and Vandepole were still at it.) Master Seamus drank his beer slowly and looked around the lounge.

Sir Stanley Galbraith and Father Armand were seated on the rearward couch, not talking to each other, but reading newspapers which they had evidently picked up in Marseille.

Apparently, Charpentier had managed to cure Zeisler's hang-over and get some food in him, for the two of them were sitting at the near table with Boothroyd and Lamar, talking in low tones. Zeisler was drinking *caffè*.

Mac Kay, Quinte, and Peabody were nowhere in sight.

Then Peabody, with his silver-handled stick, limped in from the passageway. He ordered ouiskie-and-splash and took it to the forward couch to sit by himself. He, too, had a newspaper, and began reading it with his touch-me-not attitude.

The sorcerer finished his beer and ordered another.

After a few minutes, Fred came back from his final duties for

the day and said to the night man: "It's all yours, Tonio. Take over." And promptly left.

"No, no; I can get it. I'm closér." It was Zeisler's voice, raised just high enough for the sorcerer to hear it. His chair was nearest the bar. He got up, caffè cup in hand, and brought it over to the bar. "Another cup of caffè, Tonio."

"Yes, sir."

Zeisler smiled and nodded at Master Seamus, but said nothing. The sorcerer returned the greeting.

And then pretended not to notice what Tonio was doing. He set the cup down behind the bar, carefully poured in a good ounce of ouiskie, then filled the cup from the carafe that sat over a small alcohol lamp. It was done in such a way that the men at the table could not possibly have told that there was anything but caffè in the cup.

Zeisler had obviously tipped him well for that bit of legerdemain long before Master Seamus had come into the lounge.

Mentally, the sorcerer allowed himself a sad chuckle. Boothroyd, Lamar, and Charpentier thought they were dutifully keeping Zeisler sober, and here he was getting blotto before their very eyes. Ah, well.

Peabody put down his newspaper and came over to the bar, glass in hand. "Another ouiskie-and-splash, if you please," he said in a very low voice.

It was brought, and he returned to his seat and his newspaper. Tonio went back to polishing glasses.

Master Seamus was well into his third beer when the Trainmaster showed up. He went around and nodded and spoke to everyone, including the sorcerer. He went back to the observation deck, and Master Seamus concluded that Quinte and Mac Kay must be back there.

Trainmaster Edmund came back to the bar, took off his hat, and wiped his balding head with a handkerchief. "Warm evening. Tonio, how are your supplies holding out?"

"We'll have plenty for the rest of the evening, Trainmaster."

"Good; good. But I just checked the utility room, and we're short of towels. These men will be wanting to bathe in the morning, and we're way short. Run up to supply and get a full set. I'll watch the bar for you."

"Right away, Trainmaster." Tonio hurried without seeming to.

The Trainmaster left his cap off and stood behind the bar. He did not polish any glasses. "Another beer, Master Sorcerer?"

"No, thanks, Trainmaster. I've had me limit for a while. I think I'll stretch me legs." He got up off the barchair and turned toward the observation deck.

"How about you, sir?" the Trainmaster called to Peabody, a few feet away, in the forward couch.

Peabody nodded, got up, and brought his glass over.

As Master Seamus passed the table where Zeisler and the other three were sitting, he heard Zeisler say: "You chaps know who that bearded chap at the bar is? I do."

"Maury, will you shut up?" said Boothroyd coldly.

Zeisler said no more.

X

"What is going on out there? A convention?" came the voice of the sorcerer's companion from the lower berth. It was a rhetorical question, so the Master Sorcerer didn't bother to answer.

It is not the loudness of a noise, nor even its unexpectedness, which wakes one up. It is the *unusual* noise that does that. And when the noise becomes *interesting*, it is difficult to go back to sleep.

The rumble and roar of the train as it moved toward Italy was actually soothing, once one got used to it. If it had only drowned out these other noises, all would have been well. But it didn't; it merely muffled them somewhat.

The sorcerer had been one of the last few to retire; only Boothroyd and Charpentier had still been in the lounge when he left to go to his compartment.

The hooded lamp had been burning low, and the gentle snores from the lower berth told him that his compartment-mate was already asleep.

He had prepared for bed and climbed in, only to find that the other man had left his newspaper on the other berth. It had been folded so that one article was uppermost, but in the dim light all he could read was the headline: NICHOLAS JOURDAN RITES TO BE HELD IN NAPOLI. It was an obituary notice.

He put the paper on the nearby shelf and began to doze off.

Then he heard a door open and close, and footsteps moving down the passageway. *Someone going to the toilet*, he thought drowsily. No, for the footsteps went right by his own door to Compartment Number One. He heard a light rap. *Hell of a time of night to go visiting*, he thought. Actually, it wasn't all that late—only a little after ten. But everyone aboard had been up since at

least four that morning, some even longer. Oh, well; no business of his.

But there were other footsteps, farther down the corridor, other doors opening and closing.

He tried to get to sleep and couldn't. Things would get quiet for a minute or two, then they would start up again. From Compartment Three, he could hear voices, but only because the partition was next to his berth. There was only the sound; he couldn't distinguish any words. Being a curious man, he shamelessly put his ear to the wall, but could still make out no words.

He tried very hard to go to sleep, but the intermittent noises continued. Footsteps. Every five minutes or so, they would go to Number One or return from there, and, of course, these were the loudest. But there were others, up and down the passageway.

There was little he could do about it. He couldn't really say they were noisy. Just irritating.

He lay there, dozing intermittently, coming up out of it every time he heard something, drifting off each time there was a lull.

After what seemed like hours, he decided there *was* something he could do about it. He could at least get up and see what was going on.

That was when his companion had said: "What's going on out there? A convention?"

The sorcerer made no reply, but climbed down the short ladder and grabbed his dressing gown. "I feel the call of nature," he said abruptly. He went out.

There was no one in the passageway. He walked slowly down to the toilet. No one appeared. No one stuck his head out of a door. No one even opened it a crack to peek. Nothing.

He took his time in the toilet. Five minutes. Ten.

He went back to his compartment. His slippers on the floor had been almost inaudible, and he'd been very careful about making any noise. They couldn't have heard him.

He reported what he had found to his compartment-mate.

"Well, whatever they were up to," said the other, "I am thoroughly awake now. I think I'll have a pipe before I go back to bed. Care to join me?"

When they came into the lounge, Tonio was seated on a stool behind the bar. He looked up. "Good evening, Father; good evening, Master Sorcerer. May I help you?"

"No, we're just going out for a smoke," said the sorcerer. "But I guess you've had a pretty busy evening, eh?"

"Me? Oh, no, sir. Nobody been in here for an hour and a half."

The two men went on out to the observation deck. Their conversation was interrupted a few minutes later by Tonio, who slid open the door and said: "Are you sure there's nothing I can get you gentlemen? I have to go forward to the supply car to fetch a few things for tomorrow, but I wouldn't want you to be needing anything."

"No, thanks. That'll be all right. As soon as the good father finishes his pipe, we'll be goin' back to bed."

Twenty minutes later, they did just that, and fell asleep immediately. It was twenty minutes after midnight.

XI

At 12:25, Tonio returned with his first load. During the daytime, when people were awake, it was permissible to use a handcart to trundle things through the aisles of the long train. But a sudden lurch of the train could upset a handcart and wake people up. Besides, there was much less to carry at night.

He carefully put his load of stuff away in the cabinets behind the bar, then went back to check the observation deck to see if his two gentlemen were still there. They were not. Good; everyone was asleep.

About time, too, he thought as he headed back uptrain for his second and last load. The gentlemen had certainly been having themselves some sort of party, going from one compartment to another like that. Though they hadn't made much noise, of course.

Tonio Bracelli was not a curious young man by nature, and if his gentlemen and ladies gave him no problems on the night run, he was content to leave them alone.

The train began to slow, and at thirty minutes after midnight, it came to an easy stop at the check station on the Ligurian border. The stop was only a formality, really. The Ligurian authorities had to check the bills of lading for the cargo in the freight cars at the front of the train, but there was no search or actual checking of the cargo itself. It was all bookkeeping.

Tonio picked out what he needed for the second load, and then stood talking to the Supply Master while the train was stopped. The locomotive braked easily enough to a smooth stop, but getting started again was sometimes a little jerky, and Tonio didn't want to be walking with his arms full when that happened. He'd wait until the train picked up speed.

He reached the rearmost car at 12:50, took his load of goods to the bar and stashed them as before. Then he went to do his last duty until the morning: cleaning out the bathroom.

It was a touchy job—not because it was hard work, or even unpleasant, but because one had to be so infernally *quiet*! The day man could bang around all he liked, but if the night man did so, the gentlefolk in Four and Five, on each side of the bathroom, might complain.

He went up to the utility compartment, just forward of Number One, got his equipment, went back to the bathroom, and went to work.

When he was finished, he took a final look around to make sure. All looked fine until he came to the last check.

He looked at the floor.

Strange. What were those red stains?

He had just mopped down the floor. It was still damp, but. . .

He stepped to one side and looked down.

The stains were coming from his right boot.

He sat down on the necessary, lifted his right foot, and looked at the bootsole. Red stains, almost gone, now.

Where the devil had they come from?

Tonio Bracelli, if not curious, was conscientious. After wiping the stains from his boot and checking the other to make sure there were none, he wiped the floor and went out to track down the source of those stains.

"Track" was certainly the word. He had left footprints of the stuff, whatever it was, up and down on the tan floor of the passageway. The darker tracks led uptrain. He followed them.

When he found their source, he lost his composure.

A great pool of what was obviously blood had seeped out from beneath the door of Compartment Number One.

XII

The Irish sorcerer was brought out of his sleep by a banging that almost slammed him awake, and a voice that was screaming: "*Sir! Sir! Open the door! Sir! Are you all right? Sir!*"

Both of the men in Compartment Number Two were on their feet and at the door within two seconds.

But the banging was not at their door, but at the one to their right—Number One. The two men grabbed their robes and went out.

Tonio was pounding his fists on the door of Number One and

shouting—almost screaming—at the top of his voice. Down the passageway, other doors were opening.

An arm reached out and a hand grabbed Tonio's shoulder. "Now, calm down, my son! What's the trouble?"

Tonio suddenly gasped and looked at the man who had laid such a firm hand on his shoulder. "Oh, Father! Look! Look at this!" He stepped back and pointed at the blood at his feet. "He doesn't answer! What should I do, Father?"

"The first thing to do, my son, is go get the Trainmaster. You don't have the key to this door, do you? No. Then go fetch Trainmaster Edmund immediately. But mind! No noise, no shouting. Don't alarm the passengers in the other cars. This is for the Trainmaster only. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father. Certainly." His voice was much calmer.

"Very well. Now, quickly." Then, and only then, did that strong hand release the young man's shoulder. Tonio left—hurriedly, but now obviously under control.

"Now, Master Seamus, Sir Stanley, we must be careful not to crowd around here any more than necessary."

Sir Stanley, who had come boiling out of Number Eight only half a second later than the sorcerer and his companion had come out of Number Two, turned to block the passageway.

His voice seemed to fill the car. "All right, now! Stand away, all of you! You men get back to your quarters! Move!"

Within half a minute, the passageway was empty, except for three men. Then Sir Stanley said: "What's happened here, Father?"

"I know no more than you do, Sir Stanley. We must wait for the Trainmaster."

"I think we ought to—" Whatever it was that Sir Stanley thought they ought to do was cut off forever by the appearance of Trainmaster Edmund, who came running in from the dining car ahead, followed by Tonio, and asked almost the same question.

"What's happened here?"

The magician stepped forward. "We don't know, Trainmaster, but that looks like blood, and I suggest you open that door."

"Certainly, certainly." The Trainmaster keyed back the bolt of Number One.

On Lower One, Goodman John Peabody lay with his smashed head hanging over the edge, his scalp a mass of clotted blood. He was very obviously quite dead.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you, Trainmaster," said the

sorcerer, putting an arm in front of Trainmaster Edmund as he started to enter.

"What? On my own train? Why not?" He sounded indignant.

"With all due apologies, Trainmaster, have you ever had a murder on your train before?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Have you ever been involved in a murder investigation?"

"No, but—"

"Well, again with apologies, Trainmaster, I have. I'm a trained forensic sorcerer. The investigators aren't going to like it if we go tramping in there, destroying clues. Do you have a chirurgian on board?"

"Yes; the train chirurgian, Dr. Vonner. But how do you know it's murder?"

"It's not suicide," the sorcerer said flatly. "His head was beaten repeatedly by that heavy, silver-headed walking-stick there on the floor. A man doesn't kill himself that way, and he doesn't do it accidentally. Send Tonio for the chirurgian."

Dr. Vonner, it turned out, had had some experience with legal cases and knew what to do—and, more important, what *not* to do. He said, after examination, that not only was Peabody dead but, in his opinion, had been dead for at least an hour. Then he said that if he was needed no further, he was going back to bed. The Trainmaster let him go.

"It's nearly two hours yet to Genova," the sorcerer said. "We won't be able to notify the authorities until then. But that's all right; nobody can get off the train while it's at speed, and I can put a preservative spell over the body and an avoidance spell on the compartment."

A voice from behind the sorcerer said: "Should I not give the poor fellow the Last Rites of Holy Mother Church?"

The Irishman turned and shook his head. "No, Father. He's quite dead now, and that can wait. If there's any Black Magic involved in this killing, your work could dissipate all trace of it, destroying what might be a valuable clue."

"I see. Very well. Shall I fetch you your bag?"

"If you would be so good, Reverend Sir."

The bag was brought, and the sorcerer went about his work. The preservative spell, cast with a night-black wand, was quickly done; the body would remain in stasis until the authorities finished their investigation. The sorcerer noted the time carefully, checking his wristwatch against that of the Trainmaster.

The avoidance spell was somewhat more involved, requiring the use of a smoking thurible and two wands, but when it was finished, no one would enter that room, or even look into it of his own free will. "You'd best re-lock that door, Trainmaster," said the Irish sorcerer. He looked down at the floor. "As for that stain, Tonio has already walked through it, but we'd best not have any more people do so. Would you be so good as to tell the others to stay away from this area until we get to Genova, Sir Stanley?"

"Certainly, Master Sorcerer."

"Thank you. I'll put me bag away now."

XIII

The sorcerer put his symbol-decorated carpetbag down on the floor while his compartment-mate closed the door behind them.

"Now that's what I call stayin' in character, me lord," said Sean O Lochlainn, Chief Forensic Sorcerer for His Royal Highness, the Duke of Normandy.

"What? Oh, you mean offering to perform the Last Rites?" Lord Darcy, the Duke's Chief Investigator, smiled. "It's what any real priest would have done, and I knew you'd get me off the hook." When he did come up out of character, he looked much younger, in spite of the disguising white hair and beard.

"Well, I did what I could, me lord. Now I suppose there's nothing for us to do but wait until we get to Genova, where the Italian authorities can straighten this out."

His lordship frowned. "I am afraid we shall have to do more than that, my dear Sean. Time is precious. We absolutely *must* get that naval treaty to Athens in time. That means we have to be in Brindisi by ten o'clock tonight. And that means we *have* to catch that Napoli-Brindisi local, which leaves fifteen minutes after the *Napoli Express* gets into the station. I don't know what the Genovese authorities will do, but if they don't hold us up in Genova, they most certainly will when we reach Rome. They'll cut the car off and hold the whole lot of us until they *do* solve it. Even if we were to go through all the proper channels and prove who we are and what we're up to, it would take so long that we'd miss that train."

Now Master Sean looked worried. "What do we do if it *isn't* solved by then, in spite of everything we do?"

Lord Darcy's face became impassive. "In that case, I shall be forced to leave you. 'Father Armand Brun' would perforce disappear, evading the Roman Armsmen and becoming a fugitive—

undoubtedly accused of the murder of one John Peabody. I would have to get to Brindisi by myself, under cover. It would be difficult in the extreme, for the Italians are very sharp indeed at that sort of work."

"I would be with you, me lord," Master Sean said stoutly.

Lord Darcy shook his head. "No. What would be difficult for one man would be impossible for two—especially two who had been known to have escaped together. 'Master Seamus Kilpadraeg' is a bona fide sorcerer, with bona fide papers from the Duke of Normandy, and, ultimately, from the King himself. 'Father Armand' is a total phony. You can stick it out; I can't. Unless, of course, I want to explode our whole mission."

"Then, me lord, we must solve the case," the magician said simply. "Where do we start?"

His lordship smiled, sighed, and sat down on the lower bed. "Now, that's more like it, my dear Sean. We start with everything we know about Peabody. When did you first notice him?"

"As I came aboard the train, me lord. I saw the walking-stick he carried. On an ordinary stick there is a decorative silver ring about two inches down from the handle. The ring on his stick was a good four inches below the silver head, the perfect length for the hilt on a sword stick. Just above the ring is an inconspicuous black stud that you press with your thumb to release the hilt from the scabbard."

Lord Darcy nodded silently. He had noticed the weapon.

"Then there was his limp," Master Sean continued. "A man with a real limp walks with the same limp all the time. He don't exaggerate it when he's walking slowly, then practically lose it when he's in a hurry."

"Ah! I hadn't noticed that," his lordship admitted. "It is difficult to judge the quality of a man's limp when he is trying to move about on a lurching train car, and I observed him at no other time. Very good! And what did you deduce from that?"

"That the limp was an excuse to carry the stick."

"And I dare say you are right. Then he needed that stick as a weapon, or thought he would, and was not used to carrying it."

Master Sean frowned. "How so, me lord?"

"Otherwise, he would either have perfected his limp or not used a limp at all." Lord Darcy paused, then: "Anything else?"

"Only that he carried his small suitcase to lunch with him, and that he always sat in the lounge on the first couch, where he could watch the door of his compartment," Master Sean said. "I

think he was afraid someone would steal his suitcase, me lord."

"Or something in it," Lord Darcy amended.

"What would that be, me lord?"

"If we knew that, my dear Sean, we'd be a great deal closer to solving this problem than we are at this moment. We—" He stopped suddenly and put his finger to his lips. There were footsteps in the passageway again. Not as loud this time, for the men were wearing slippers instead of boots, but the doors could be heard opening and closing.

"I think the convention has started again," Lord Darcy said quietly. He walked over to the door. By the time he was easing it open, he had again donned the character of an elderly priest. He opened the door almost noiselessly.

Sir Stanley, facing down the car toward the lounge, had his back to Lord Darcy. Through the windows beyond him, the Ligurian countryside rushed by in the darkness.

"Standing guard, Sir Stanley?" Lord Darcy asked mildly.

Sir Stanley turned. "Guard? Oh, no, Father. The rest of us are going into the lounge to discuss this. Would you and Master Seamus join us?"

"I would be glad to. You, Master Sorcerer?"

Master Sean blinked, and, after a moment, said: "Certainly, Father."

XIV

"Are you **absolutely** certain it was murder?" Gwiliam Hauser's voice was harsh.

Master Sean O Lochlainn leaned back in the couch and narrowed his eyes at Hauser. "*Absolutely* certain? No, sir. Can you tell me, sir, how a man can have the whole front of his head smashed in while lying on a lower berth? *Unless* it is murder? If so, then I may reconsider my statement that I am *reasonably* certain that it was murder."

Hauser stroked his dark-streaked white beard. "I see. Thank you, Master Sorcerer." His sharp eyes looked round at the others in the lounge. "Did any of you—*any* of you—see anything at all that looked suspicious last night?"

"Or *hear* anything?" Lord Darcy added.

Hauser gave him a quick glance. "Yes. Or hear anything."

The others all looked at each other. Nobody said a word.

Finally, the too-handsome Mac Kay leaned back in his chair at the table near the bar and said: "Uh, Father, you and the Master

Sorcerer had the compartment next to Peabody's. Didn't either of you hear anything?"

"Why, yes, we did," Lord Darcy said mildly. "We both remarked upon it."

All eyes in the lounge were focused on him now, with the exception of Master Sean's. The sorcerer was watching the others.

"Beginning at about twenty minutes after ten last night," Lord Darcy continued in the same mild voice, "and continuing for about an hour and a half, there was an absolute parade of footsteps up and down that passageway. There was much conversation and soft rappings at doors. There were knockings on the door of Peabody's compartment more than a dozen times. Other than that, I heard nothing out of the usual."

The three-second silence was broken by Sir Stanley. "We were just walking around, talking. Visiting, you know."

Zeisler was over at the bar, drinking coffee. Master Sean hadn't seen it this time, but he was certain Tonio had spiked the cup again. "That's right," Zeisler said in a sudden voice. "Talking. I couldn't sleep, myself. Had a nap this afternoon. Went visiting. Seems nobody else could sleep, either."

Boothroyd nodded. "I couldn't sleep either. Noisy damn train."

At that point all the others joined in—the words were different, but the agreement was there.

"And Peabody couldn't sleep either?" Lord Darcy's voice was bland.

"No, he couldn't," said Sir Stanley gruffly.

"I didn't know any of you knew the gentleman." Lord Darcy's voice was soft, his eyes mild, his manner gentle. "I did notice one of you spoke to him during the day."

"I recognized him," Zeisler said. The ouiskie wasn't slowing his brain down much. "Chap I used to know. Didn't get his name, and didn't recognize him at first, what with the beard. Didn't use to wear a beard, you see. So I went to talk to him—renew old acquaintance, you know. Bit shy at first, but we got along. He wanted to talk to the other chaps, so—" He gestured with one hand, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"I see." His Lordship smiled benevolently. "Then which of you was the last to see him alive?"

Hauser looked at Jason Quinte. "Was that you, Quinte?"

"Me? No, I think it was Val."

"No, Mac talked to him after I did."

"But then Sharpie went back in, didn't you, Sharpie?"

"Yes, but I thought Simon—"

And so it went. Lord Darcy listened with a sad but benevolent smile on his face. After five minutes, it was obvious that they could not agree on who had seen Peabody last, and that not one of them wanted to own up to it.

Finally, Gavin Tailleir stood up from his seat in the rearward couch. His face was paler than usual, making the scar more conspicuous. "I don't know about the rest of you, but it's obvious I am not going to get any more sleep tonight. I am tired of wandering about in my nightclothes. I'm going back and put some clothes on."

Valentine Herrick, his bright red hair looking badly mussed, said: "Well, I'd like to get some sleep, myself, but . . ."

Lord Darcy, in a voice that seemed soft but still carried, said: "It doesn't much matter what we do now; we won't get any sleep after we reach Genova, and we might as well be prepared for it."

XV

Master Sean wanted to talk privately with Lord Darcy. For one thing, he wanted to know why his lordship had permitted all the passengers in the car to get together to compare stories when the proper procedure would be to get them alone and ask them questions separately. Granted, here in Italy Lord Darcy had no authority to question them; and, granted, he was playing the part of a priest, but—damn it!—he should have done *something*.

But no, he just sat there on the forward sofa, smiling, watching, listening, and saying very little, while the other passengers sat around and talked or drank or both.

There was quite a bit of *caffè* consumed, but the *ouiskie*, brandy, wine, and beer were not neglected, either. Master Sean and Lord Darcy stuck to *caffè*.

Tonio didn't seem to mind. He had to stay up all night, anyway, and at least he wasn't bored.

Just before the train reached Genova, the Trainmaster returned. He took off his hat and asked for the gentlemen's attention.

"Gentlemen, we are approaching Genova. Normally, if you happened to be awake, you could take advantage of the hour stopover to go to the restaurant or tavern, although most people sleep through this stop.

"I am afraid, however, that I shall have to insist that you all remain aboard until the authorities arrive. The doors will not be

opened until they get here. I am sorry to inconvenience you in this way, but such is my duty."

There were some low mutterings among the men, but nobody said anything to contradict Trainmaster Edmund.

"Thank you, gentlemen," the Trainmaster said. "I shall do my best to see that the authorities get their work over with as promptly as possible." He returned his hat to his head and departed.

"Technically," Boothroyd said, "I suppose we're all under arrest."

"No," Hauser growled. "We are being detained for questioning. Not quite the same thing. We're only here as witnesses."

One of us isn't, Master Sean thought. And wondered how many others were thinking the same thing. But nobody said anything.

The Genovese Armsmen were surprisingly prompt. Within fifteen minutes after the train's brakes had made their last hissing sigh, a Master-at-Arms, two Sergeants-at-Arms, and four Armsmen had come aboard. All were in uniform.

This was merely the preliminary investigation. Names were taken and brief statements were written down by the Master and one of the Sergeants, apparently the only ones of the seven who spoke Anglo-French with any fluency. Master Sean and Lord Darcy both spoke Italian, but neither said anything about it. No need to volunteer information that wasn't asked for.

It was while the preliminary investigation was going on that the two Norman law officers found where each of the other twelve were billeted.

Compartment No. 3 — Maurice Zeisler; Sidney Charpentier

Compartment No. 4 — Martyn Boothroyd; Gavin Tailleur

Compartment No. 5 — Simon Lamar; Arthur Mac Kay

Compartment No. 6 — Valentine Herrick; Charles Jamieson

Compartment No. 7 — Jason Quinte; Lyman Vandepole

Compartment No. 8 — Sir Stanley Galbraith, Gwiliam Hauser

Number Two, of course, contained "Armand Brun" and "Seamus Kilpadraeg" and John Peabody had been alone in Number One.

The uniformed Master-at-Arms made a short, polite bow to Master Sean. Since he was armed by the sword at his side, he did not remove his hat. "Master Sorcerer, I believe it was you who so kindly put the avoidance spell and the preservation spell on the deceased one?"

"Aye, Master Armsman, I am."

"I must ask you to remove the avoidance spell, if you please. It

is necessary that I inspect the body in order to determine that death has indeed taken place."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. Me bag is in me compartment. Won't take but a minute."

As they went down the passageway, Master Sean saw Trainmaster Edmund standing patiently by the door of Number One, holding the key in his hand. The sorcerer knew what the Armsman's problem was. A death had been reported, but, so far, he hadn't seen any real evidence of it. Even if the Trainmaster had unlocked the door, the spell would have kept both men out and, indeed, kept them from even looking into the compartment.

Master Sean got his symbol-decorated carpetbag out of Number Two, and told Trainmaster Edmund: "Unlock it, Trainmaster—and then let me have a little room to work."

The Trainmaster unlocked the door, but did not open it. He and the Master-at-Arms stood well back, in front of Number Three. Master Sean noticed with approval that a Man-at-Arms was standing at the far end of the passageway, in front of Number Eight, facing the lounge, blocking the way.

Himself being immune to his own avoidance spell, Master Sean looked all around the compartment. Everything was as he had left it. He looked down at the body. The blood still looked fresh, so the preservative spell had been well cast—not that the stout little Irish sorcerer had ever doubted it, but it was always best to check.

He looked down at the floor near his feet. The blood which had leaked out into the passageway was dark and dried. It had not, he noticed, been disturbed since Tonio had tromped through it. Good.

Master Sean placed his carpetbag carefully on the floor and took from it a small bronze brazier with tripod legs. He put three lumps of willow charcoal in it, set it on the floor in the doorway, and carefully lit the charcoal. When it was hot and glowing, he took a pinch of powder from a small glass phial and dropped it on the coals. A spiral of aromatic smoke curled upwards. The magician's lips moved silently.

Then he took a four-by-four-inch square of white paper from his bag and folded it in a curious and intricate manner. Murmuring softly, he dropped it on the coals, where it flared into orange flame and subsided into gray ash.

After a moment, he took a bronze lid from among his paraphernalia and fitted it to the brazier to smother the coals. He picked up the brazier by one leg and moved it aside. Then he stood up

and looked at the Armsman. "There you are, Master Armsman; it's all yours." Then he gestured. "Watch the bloodstain, here, and watch that brazier. It's still hot."

The Master-at-Arms went in, looked at the remains of John Peabody and touched one wrist. He wrote in a notebook. Then he came out. "Lock it up again, Trainmaster. I can now state that a man identified as one John Peabody is dead, and that there is reason to believe that a felony has been committed."

Trainmaster Edmund looked surprised. "Is that all?"

"For now," the Armsmaster said. "Lock it up, and give me the key."

The Trainmaster locked the compartment, saying as he did so: "I can't give you a duplicate. We don't keep them around for security reasons. If a passenger loses one—" He took the key from the lock—"we get a duplicate either from the Paris office or the Napoli office. I'll have to give you one of my master keys. And I'll want a receipt for it."

"Certainly. How many master keys do you have?"

"For this car? Two. This one, here, and one that's locked in my office forward for emergencies."

"See that it stays locked up. This key, then, is a master for this car only?"

"Oh, yes. Each car has separate lock sets. What are you doing, Master Sorcerer?" The Trainmaster looked puzzled.

Master Sean was kneeling by the door, the fingers of his right hand touching the lock, his eyes closed. "Just checking." The sorcerer stood up. "I noticed your lock spell on my own lock when I first used my key. Commercial, but very tight and well-knit. No wonder you don't keep duplicates aboard. Even an exact duplicate wouldn't work unless it was attuned to the spell. May I see that master key, Armsmaster? Thank you. Mmmmm. Yes. Thank you again." He handed the key back.

"What were you checking just now?" the Trainmaster asked.

"I wanted to see if the spell had been tampered with," Master Sean explained. "It hasn't been."

"Thank you, Master Sorcerer," the Master-at-Arms said, making a note in his notebook. "And thank you, Trainmaster. That will be all for now."

The three of them went on back to the lounge.

There was an empty space on the sofa next to Lord Darcy—who was still playing "Father Armand" to the hilt—so Master Sean walked over and sat beside him.

"How are things going, Father?" he asked in a low, conversational tone. In the relative quiet of the stationary car, it was easier to talk in soft voices without seeming to whisper.

"Interestingly," Lord Darcy murmured. "I haven't heard everything, of course, but I've been listening. They seem to be finished now."

At that moment, one of the Sergeants-at-Arms said, in Italian: "Master Armsman, here comes the Praefect."

Master Sean, like the Armsmaster, turned his head to look out the window. Then he looked quickly away.

"Our goose is cooked," he said very softly to Lord Darcy. "Look who's coming."

"I did. I don't know him."

"I do. It's Cesare Sarto. And *he* knows *me*."

XVI

The Roman Praefecture of Police has no exact counterpart in any other unit of the Empire. As elsewhere, every Duchy in Italy has its own organization of Armsmen which enforces the law within the boundaries of that Duchy. The Roman Praefecture is an instrumentality of the Italian Parliament to co-ordinate the efforts of these organizations.

The Praefects' powers are limited. Even in the Principality of Latium, where Rome is located, they have no police powers unless they have been called in by the local authorities. (Although a "citizen's arrest" by a Roman Praefect carries a great deal more weight than such an arrest by an ordinary civilian.)

They wear no uniforms; their only official identification is a card and a small golden shield with the letters SPQR above a bas-relief of the Capitoline Wolf, with a serial number and the words *Praefecture of Police* below her.

Their record for cases solved and convictions obtained is high, their record for violence low. These facts, plus the always gentlemanly or ladylike behavior of every Praefect, has made the Roman Praefecture of Police one of the most prestigious and honored bodies of criminal investigators on the face of the Earth.

In the gaslight of the train platform, Cesare Sarto waited as the Master-at-Arms came out of the car to greet him. Master Sean kept his face averted, but Lord Darcy watched carefully.

Sarto was a man of medium height with dark hair and eyes and a neatly-trimmed mustache. He was of average build, but carried himself like an athlete. There was power and speed in that well-

muscled body. His face, while not exactly handsome, was strong and showed character and intelligence.

After a few minutes, he came into the car. He put a suitcase on the floor and looked around at the fourteen passengers assembled in the lounge. They all watched him, waiting.

His eyes betrayed no flicker of recognition as they passed over Master Sean's face.

Then he said: "Gentlemen, I am Cesare Sarto, an agent of the Roman Praefecture of Police. The Chief Master-at-Arms of the city of Genova has asked me to take charge of this case—at least until we get to Rome." His Anglo-French was almost without accent.

"Technically," he continued, "this is the only way it can be handled. John Peabody was apparently murdered, but we do not yet know whether he was killed in Provence or in Liguria, and until we do, we won't know who has jurisdiction over the case.

"As of now, we must act on the assumption that Peabody died *after* this train crossed the Italian border. Therefore, this train will proceed to Rome. If we have not determined exactly what happened by then, this car will be detached and the investigation will continue. Those of you who can be exonerated beyond doubt will be allowed to go on to Napoli. The others, I fear, will have to be detained."

"Do you mean," Sir Stanley interrupted, "that you suspect one of us?"

"No one of you individually, sir. Not yet. But all of you collectively, yes. It surely must be obvious, sir, that since Peabody was killed in this car, someone in this car must have killed him. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Sir Stanley Galbraith," the gray-haired man said rather curtly.

Praefect Cesare looked at his notebook. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Sir Stanley." He looked around at the others. "I have here a list of your names as procured by the Master-at-Arms. In order that I may know you better, I will ask that each of you raise his hand when his name is called."

As he called off the names, it was obvious that each man's name and face were linked permanently in his memory when the hand was raised.

When he came to "Seamus Kilpadraeg," he looked the sorcerer over exactly as he had the others, then went on to the next name.

When he had finished, he said: "Now, gentlemen, I will ask you to go to your compartments and remain there until I call for you."

The train will be leaving for Rome in—" He glanced at his wristwatch. "—eighteen minutes. Thank you."

Master Sean and Lord Darcy dutifully returned to their compartment.

"Praefect Cesare," Lord Darcy said, "is not only highly intelligent, but very quick-minded."

"How do you deduce that, me lord?"

"You said he knew you, and yet he showed no sign of it. Obviously, he perceived that if you were traveling under an alias, you must have a good reason for it. And, you being who you are, that the reason was probably a legitimate one. Rather than betray you in public, he decided to wait until he could talk to you privately. When he does, tell him that Father Armand is your confidant and close friend. Vouch for me, but don't reveal my identity. I expect him to be here within minutes."

There came a knock on the door.

Master Sean slid it open to reveal Praefect Cesare Sarto. "Come in, Praefect," the sorcerer said. "We've been expecting you."

"Oh?" Sarto raised an eyebrow. "I would like to talk to you privately, Master Seamus."

Master Sean lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "Come in Cesare. Father Armand knows who I am."

The Praefect came in, and Master Sean slid the door shut. "Sean O Lochlainn at your service, Praefect Cesare," he said with a grin.

"Sean!" the Praefect grabbed him by both shoulders. "It's been a long time! You should write more often." He turned to Lord Darcy. "Pardon me, Padre, but I haven't seen my friend here since we took a course together at the University of Milano, five years ago. 'The Admissibility of Certain Magically Derived Evidence in Criminal Jurisprudence' it was."

"That's all right," Lord Darcy said. "I'm glad for both of you."

The Praefect looked for a moment at the slack-shouldered, white-haired, white-bearded man who peered benignly at him over gold-rimmed half-glasses. Then he looked back at Master Sean. "You say you know the Padre?"

"Intimately, for many years," Master Sean said. "Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of Father Armand in perfect confidence. You can trust him as you trust me."

"I didn't mean—" Sarto cut himself off and turned to Lord Darcy. "Reverend Sir, I did not intend to imply that one of the Sacred Clergy was not to be trusted. But this is a murder case,

and they're touchy to handle. Do you know anything about criminology?"

"I have worked with criminals, and I have heard their confessions many times," Lord Darcy said with a straight face. "I think I can say I have some insight into the criminal mind."

Master Sean, with an equally straight face, said: "I think I can safely say that there are several cases that Lord Darcy might not have solved without the aid of this man here."

Praefect Cesare relaxed. "Well! That's fine, then. Sean, is it any of my business why you're traveling under an alias?"

"I'm doing a little errand for Prince Richard. It has nothing whatever to do with John Peabody, so, strictly speaking, it is none of your business. I imagine, though, that if you really had to know, His Highness would give me permission to tell you before any case came to trial."

"All right; let that rest for now. There are some other questions I must ask you."

The questions elicited the facts that neither Master Sean nor "Father Armand" had ever seen or heard of Peabody before, that neither had ever spoken to him, and that each could account for his time during the night. On being put the direct question, each gave his solemn word that he had not killed Peabody.

"Very well," the Praefect said at last, "I'll accept it as a working hypothesis that you two are innocent. Now, I have a little problem I want you to help me with."

"The murder, you mean?" Master Sean asked.

"In a way, yes. You see, it's like this: I have never handled a murder case before. My field is fraud and embezzlement. I'm an accountant, not, strictly speaking, an Armsman at all. I just happened to be in Genova, finishing up another case. I was going to go back to Rome on this train, anyway. So I got a teleson call from Rome, telling me to take over until we get there. Rome doesn't expect me to solve the case; Rome just wants me as a caretaker until the experts can take over."

He was silent for a moment, then, suddenly, a white-toothed, almost impish grin came over his face. "But the minute I recognized you, an idea occurred to me. With your experience, we just might be able to clear this up before we get to Rome! It would look good on my record if I succeed, but no black mark if I don't. I can't lose, you see. The head of the homicide division, Angelo Ratti, will be waiting for us at the station in Rome, and I'd give half a year's pay to see the look on his face if I could hand him

the killer when I step off."

Master Sean gawped. Then he found words. "You mean you want us to help you nail the murderer *before* we get to Rome?"

"Exactly."

"I think that's a capital idea," said Lord Darcy.

XVII

The *Napoli Express* moved toward Rapello, on its way to Rome. In a little over an hour, it would be dawn. At four minutes of noon, the train would arrive in Rome.

First on the agenda was a search of the body and the compartment in which it lay. Peabody's suitcase was in the locker reserved for Lower One, but the key was in the lock, so there was no trouble getting it. It contained nothing extraordinary—only clothes and toilet articles. Peabody himself had been carrying nothing unusual, either—if one excepted the sword stick. He had some loose change, a gold sovereign, two silver sovereigns, and five gold-sovereign notes. He carried some keys that probably fit his home locks or office locks. A card identified him as Commander John Wycliffe Peabody, Imperial Navy, Retired.

"I see nothing of interest there," Praefect Cesare commented.

"It's what *isn't* there that's of interest," Lord Darcy said.

The Praefect nodded. "Exactly. Where is the key to his compartment?"

"It appears to me," Lord Darcy said, "that the killer went in, killed Peabody, took the key, and locked the compartment so that the body wouldn't be found for a while."

"I agree," Cesare said.

"Then the murderer might still have the key on him," Master Sean said.

"It's possible." Praefect Cesare looked glum. "But it's far more likely that it's on or near the railroad tracks somewhere between here and Provence."

"That would certainly be the intelligent thing to do," Lord Darcy said. "Should we search for it anyway?"

"Not just yet, I think. If he kept it, he won't throw it away now. If not, we won't find it."

Lord Darcy was rather pleased with the Praefect's answer. It was the one he would have given, had he been in charge. It was rather irksome not to be in charge of the case, but at least Cesare Sarto knew what he was doing.

"The killer," the Praefect went on, "had no way of knowing that

the blood from Peabody's scalp would run under the door and into the passageway. Let's assume it hadn't. When would the body have been discovered?"

"Probably not until ten o'clock this morning," Master Sean said firmly. "I've taken this train before, though not with the same crew. The day man—that's Fred, this trip—comes on at nine. He makes up the beds of those who are already awake, but he doesn't start waking people up until about ten. It might have been as late as half past ten before Peabody was found."

"I see," said Praefect Cesare. "I don't see that that gets us any forwarder just yet, but we'll keep it in mind. Now, we cannot do an autopsy on the body, of course, but I'd like a little more information on those blows and the weapon."

"I think I can oblige you, Praefect," said Master Sean.

The sorcerer carefully inspected the walking stick with its concealed blade. "We'll do this first; it's the easier job and may give us some clue that will tell us what to do next."

From his bag, he took a neatly-folded white cerecloth and spread it over the small nearby table. "First time I've done this on a train," he muttered, half to himself. "Have to watch me balance."

The other two said nothing.

He took out a thin, three-inch, slightly concave golden disk, a pair of tweezers, a small insufflator, and an eight-inch, metallic-looking, blue-gray wand with crystalline sapphire tips.

With the tweezers, he selected two hairs, one from the dead man and one from the silver head of the stick. He carefully laid them parallel, an inch and a half apart, on the cerecloth. Then he touched each with the wand, murmuring solemn spondees of power under his breath. Then he stood up, well away from the hairs, not breathing.

Slowly, like two tiny logs rolling toward each other, the hairs came together, still parallel.

"His hair on the stick, all right," Master Sean said. "We'll see about the blood."

The only sound in the room except the rumbling of the train was the almost inaudible movement of Sarto's pen on his notebook.

A similar incantation, this time using the little golden saucer, showed the blood to be the same.

"This one's a little more complex," Master Sean said. "Since the wounds are mostly on the forward part of the head, I'll have to

turn him over and put him flat on his back. Will that be all right?" He directed the question to the Praefect.

"Certainly," Praefect Cesare said. "I have all the notes and sketches of the body's position when found. Here, I'll give you a hand."

Moving a two-hundred-pound dead body is not easy in the confines of a small compartment, but it would have been much more difficult if Master Sean's preservative spell had not prevented *rigor mortis* from setting in.

"There; that'll do. Thank you," the stout little sorcerer said. "Would either of you care to check the wounds visually?"

They would. Master Sean's powerful magnifying glass was passed from hand to hand.

"Bashed in right proper," Sarto muttered.

"Thorough job," Lord Darcy agreed. "But not efficient. Only two or three of those blows were hard enough to kill, and there must be a dozen of them. Peculiar."

"Now, gentlemen," the sorcerer said, "we'll see if that stick actually was the murder weapon."

It was a crucial test. Hair and blood had been planted before on innocent weapons. The thaumaturgical science would tell them whether or not it had happened this time.

Master Sean used the insufflator to blow a cloud of powder over both the area of the wounds and the silver knob on the stick. There was very little of the powder, and it was so fine that the excess floated away like smoke.

"Now, if you'll turn that lamp down . . ."

In the dim yellow glow of the turned-down wall lamp, almost no details could be seen. All was in shadow. Only the glittering tips of Master Sean's rapidly moving wand could be seen, glowing with a blue light of their own.

Then, abruptly, there seemed to be thousands of tiny white fireflies moving over the upper part of the dead man's face and over the knob of the stick. There were several thin, twinkling threads of the minute sparks between face and knob.

After several seconds, Master Sean gave his wand a final snap with his wrist, and the tiny sparks vanished.

"That's it. Turn up the lights, if you please. The stick was definitely the murder weapon."

Praefect Cesare Sarto nodded slowly, looking thoughtful. "Very well. What's our next step?" He paused. "What would Lord Darcy do next?"



His lordship was standing behind and a little to the left of the Italian, and, as Master Sean looked at both of them, Darcy traced an interrogation point in the air with a forefinger.

"Why, me lord's next step," said the sorcerer as if he had known all along, "would be to question the suspects again. More thoroughly, this time." Lord Darcy held up his forefinger, and Master Sean added: "One at a time, of course."

"That sounds sensible," Sarto agreed. "And I can get away with having you two present by saying that you are Acting Forensic Sorcerer on this case and that you, Reverend Sir, are *amicus curia* as a representative of Holy Mother Church. By the way, are you a Sensitive, Father?"

"No, unfortunately, I am not."

"Pity. Well, we needn't tell them that. Let them worry. Now, what sort of questions do we ask? Give me a case of tax fraud, and I have an impressive roster of questions to ask the people involved, but I'm a little out of my element here."

"Why, as to that . . ." Lord Darcy began.

XVIII

"They are lying," Praefect Cesare said flatly, three hours later.

"Each and severally, every single one of the bastards is lying."

"And not very well, either," added Master Sean.

"Well, let us see what we have here," Lord Darcy said, picking up his notes.

They were seated at the rear table in the lounge; there was no one else in the car. Segregation of the suspects had not been difficult; the Trainmaster had opened up the dining car early, and the Genovese Master-at-Arms that Sarto had brought with him was watching over it. The men had been taken from their compartments one at a time, questioned, then taken back to the dining car. That kept them from discussing the questioning with those who hadn't been questioned yet.

Tonio, the night man, had been questioned first, then told to get out of the car and stay out. He didn't mind; he knew there would be no business and no tips that morning.

The Trainmaster had arranged for *caffè* to be served early in the rear of the dining car, and Lord Darcy had prepared the three interrogators a pot from behind the bar.

At eight o'clock, the stewards had begun serving breakfast in the dining car. It was now nearly nine.

Rome was some three hours away.

Lord Darcy was looking over his transcript of the questioning when the Roman Praefect said: "Do you see the odd thing about this group? That they know each other?"

"Well, some of 'em know each other," Master Sean said.

"No, the Praefect is perfectly right," Lord Darcy said without looking up. "They *all* know each other—and well."

"And yet," Cesare Sarto continued, "they seem anxious that we should not know that. They are together for a purpose, and yet they say nothing about that purpose."

"Master Sean," Lord Darcy said, "obviously you did not read that Marseille newspaper I left on your berth last night."

"No, Father. I was tired. Come to think of it, I still am. You refer to the obituary?"

"I do." Lord Darcy looked at Sarto. "Perhaps it was in the Genova papers. The funeral of a certain Nicholas Jourdan is to be held in Napoli on the morrow."

"I heard of it," Praefect Cesare said. "And I got more from the talk of my fellow officers than was in the paper. Captain Nicholas Jourdan, Imperial Navy, Retired, was supposed to have died of food poisoning, but there's evidence that it was a very cleverly arranged suicide. If it *was* suicide, it was probably dropped by the

Neapolitan officials. We don't like to push that sort of thing if there's no crime involved because there's such a fuss afterwards about the funeral. As you well know."

"Hmm," said Lord Darcy. "I didn't know the suicide angle. Is there evidence that he was depressed?"

"I heard there was, but nobody mentioned any reason for it. Health reasons, perhaps."

"I know of another reason," Lord Darcy said. "Or, at least, a possible reason. About three years ago, Captain Jourdan retired from the navy. It was an early retirement; he was still a young man for a captain. Health reasons were given."

"Actually, he had a choice between forced retirement or a rather nasty court-martial."

"Apparently, he had been having a rather torrid love affair with a young Sicilian woman from Messina, and was keeping her in an apartment in Napoli. Normally, that sort of thing doesn't bother the Navy too much, but this particular young person turned out to be an agent of His Slavonic Majesty, Casimir of Poland."

"Ah-ha! Espionage rears its ugly head," the Praefect said.

"Precisely. At the time, Captain Jourdan was commanding H.I.M.S. *Helgoland Bay* and was a very popular commander, both with his officers and his men. Obviously, the Admiralty thought well of him, too, or they shouldn't have put him in command of one of the most important battleships of the line."

"But the discovery that his mistress was a spy cast a different light on things. It turned out that they could not prove he knew she was a spy, nor that he had ever told her any naval secrets. But the suspicion remained. He was given his choice."

"A court-martial would have ruined his career with the navy forever, of course. They'd have found him innocent, then shipped him off to some cold little island off the southern coast of New France and left him there with nothing to do but count penguins. So, naturally, he retired."

"If, as you suggest, it was suicide, it might have been three years of despondency that accounted for it."

Praefect Cesare nodded slowly, a look of satisfaction on his face. "I should have seen it. The way these twelve men deport themselves, the way certain of them show deference to certain others... They are some of the officers of the *Helgoland Bay*. And so, obviously, was Peabody."

"I should say so, yes," Lord Darcy agreed.

"The trouble is," Sarto said, "we still have no motive. What we have to do is get one of them to crack. Both of you know them better than I do; which would you suggest?"

Master Sean said: "I would suggest young Jamieson. Father?"

"I agree, Master Sean. He admitted that he went back to talk to Peabody, but I had the feeling that he didn't want to, that he didn't like Peabody. Perhaps you could put some pressure on him, my dear Praefect."

Blond, pink-faced young Charles Jamieson was called in.

He sat down nervously. It is not easy for a young man to be other than nervous when faced by three older, stern-faced men—a priest, a powerful sorcerer, and an agent of the Roman Praefecture of Police. It is worse when one is involved in a murder case.

Cesare Sarto looked grim, his mouth hard, his eyes cold. The man he had been named for, Caius Iulius, must have looked similar when faced by some badly erring young centurion more than two millenia before.

"Young man, are you aware that impeding the investigation of a major felony by lying to the investigating officer is not only punishable by civilian law, but that I can have you court-martialed by the Imperial Navy, and that you may possibly lose your commission in disgrace?"

Jamieson's pink face turned almost white. His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"I am aware," the Praefect continued remorselessly, "that one or more of your superiors now in the dining car may have given you orders to do what you have done, but such orders are unlawful, and, in themselves, constitute a court-martial offense."

The young man was still trying to find his voice when kindly old Father Armand broke in. "Now, Praefect, let us not be too hard on the lad. I am sure that he now sees the seriousness of his crime. Why don't you tell us all about it, my son? I'm sure the Praefect will not press charges if you help us now."

Sarto nodded slowly, but his face didn't change, as though he were yielding the point reluctantly.

"Now, my son, let's begin again. Tell us your name and rank, and about what you and your fellow officers did last night."

Jamieson's color had come back. He took a breath. "Charles James Jamieson, Lieutenant, Imperial Navy, British Royal Fleet, at present Third Supply Officer aboard His Imperial Majesty's Ship *Helgoland Bay*, sir! Uh—that is, *Father*." He had almost saluted.

"Relax, my son; I am not a naval officer. Go on. Begin with why you and the others are aboard this train and not at your stations."

"Well, sir, the *Hellbay* is in drydock just now, and we were all more or less on leave, you see, but we had to stay around Portsmouth. Then, a week ago, we got the news that our old captain, who retired three years ago, had died and was being buried in Napoli, so we all got together and decided to form a party to go pay our respects. That's all there is to it, really, Father."

"Was Commander John Peabody one of your group?" the Praefect asked sharply.

"No, sir. He retired shortly after our old captain did. Until yesterday, none of us had seen him for three years."

"Your old captain was, I believe, the late Nicholas Jourdan?" Sarto asked.

"Yes, sir."

"*Why did you dislike Commander Peabody?*" the Praefect snapped.

Jamieson's face became suddenly pinker. "No particular reason, sir. I didn't like him, true, but it was just one of those things. Some people rub each other the wrong way."

"You hated him enough to kill him," Praefect Cesare said flatly.

It was as though Jamieson were prepared for that. He didn't turn a hair. "No, sir. I didn't like him, that's true. But I didn't kill him." It was as though he had rehearsed the answer.

"Who did, then?"

"It is my belief, sir, that some unknown person got aboard the train during the ten minutes we were at the Italian border, came in, killed the commander, and left." That answer, too, sounded rehearsed.

"Very well," the Praefect said, "that's all for now. Go to your compartment and stay there until you are called."

Jamieson obeyed.

"Well, what do you think, Father?" Cesare Sarto asked.

"The same as you. He gave us some of the truth, but he's still lying." He thought for a moment. "Let's try a different tactic. We can get—"

He stopped. A man in red-and-blue uniform was coming toward them from the passageway. It was Goodman Fred, the day man.

He stopped at the table. "Excuse me, gentlemen. I have heard about the investigation, of course. The Trainmaster told me to report to you before I went on duty." He looked a little baffled. "I'm not sure what my duties would be, in the circumstances."

Before Sarto could speak, Lord Darcy said: "What would they normally be?"

"Tend the bar, and make up the beds."

"Well, there will be no need to tend bar as yet, but you may as well make up the beds."

Fred brightened. "Thank you, Father, Praefect." He went back to the passageway.

"You were saying something about trying a different tactic," Praefect Cesare prompted.

"Ah, yes," said his lordship. And explained.

XIX

Maurice Zeisler did not look any the better for the time since he had had his last drink. He looked haggard and old.

Sidney Charpentier was in better shape, but even he looked tired.

The two men sat in the remaining empty chairs at the rear table, facing the three inquisitors.

Master Sean said: "Goodman Sidney Charpentier, I believe you told me you were a licensed Lay Healer. May I see your license, please." It was an order, not a question. It was a Master of the Guild speaking to an apprentice.

There was reluctance, but no hesitation. "Certainly, Master." Charpentier produced the card.

Master Sean looked it over carefully. "I see. Endorsed by My Lord Bishop of Wexford. I know his lordship well. Chaplain Admiral of the Imperial Navy. What is your rank, sir?"

Zeisler's baggy eyes looked suddenly alert, but he said nothing. Charpentier said: "Senior Lieutenant, Master Seamus."

The sorcerer looked at Zeisler. "And yours?"

Zeisler looked at Charpentier with a wry grin. "Not to worry, Sharpie. Young Jamie must've told 'em. Not your fault." Then he looked at Master Sean. "Lieutenant Commander Maurice Edwy Zeisler at your service, Master Seamus."

"And I at yours, Commander. Now, we might as well get all these ranks straight. Let's begin with Sir Stanley."

The list was impressive:

Captain Sir Stanley Galbraith

Commander Gwiliam Hauser

Lt. Commander Martyn Boothroyd

Lt. Commander Gavin Tailleir

Lt. Commander Maurice Zeisler

Sr. Lieutenant Sidney Charpentier
Sr. Lieutenant Simon Lamar
Sr. Lieutenant Arthur Mac Kay
Sr. Lieutenant Jason Quinte
Lieutenant Lyman Vanepole
Lieutenant Valentine Herrick
Lieutenant Charles Jamieson

"I presume," Lord Darcy said carefully, "that if the *Helgoland Bay* were not in drydock at present, it would have been inconvenient to allow all you gentlemen to leave at one time, eh?"

Zeisler made a noise that was a blend of a cough and a laugh. "Inconvenient, Father? *Impossible.*"

"Even so," Lord Darcy continued quietly, "is it not unusual for so many of you to be away from your ship at one time? What occasioned it?"

"Captain Jourdan died," Zeisler said in a cold voice.

"Many men die," Lord Darcy said. "What made *his* death so special?" His voice was as cold as Zeisler's.

Charpentier opened his mouth to say something, but Zeisler cut him off. "Because Captain Nicholas Jourdan was one of the finest naval officers who ever lived."

Praefect Cesare said: "So all of you were going to the Jourdan funeral—including the late Commander Peabody?"

"That's right, Praefect," Charpentier said. "But Peabody wasn't one of the original group. There were sixteen of us going; we wanted the car to ourselves, you see. But the other four couldn't make it; their leaves were suddenly cancelled. That's how Peabody, the good father, here, and the master sorcerer got their berths."

"You had no idea Peabody was coming, then?"

"None. We'd none of us seen him for nearly three years," Charpentier said.

"Almost didn't recognize him," Zeisler put in. "That beard, you know. He'd grown that since we saw him last. But I recognized that sword-stick of his, and that made me look closer at the face. I recognized him. So did Commander Hauser." He chuckled. "Of course, old Hauser would."

"Why he more than anyone else?" the Praefect asked.

"He's head of Ship's Security. He used to be Peabody's immediate superior."

"Let's get back to that sword-stick," Lord Darcy said. "You say

you recognized it. Did anyone else?"

Zeisler looked at Charpentier. "Did you?"

"I really didn't pay any attention until you pointed it out, Maury. Of course, we all knew he had it. Bought in Lisbon four, five years ago. But I hadn't thought of it, or him, for three years."

"Tell us more about Peabody," Lord Darcy said. "What sort of man was he?"

Charpentier rubbed his big nose with a thick forefinger. "Decent sort. Reliable. Good officer. Wouldn't you say, Maury?"

"Oh, yes," Zeisler agreed. "Good chap to go partying with, too. I remember one time in a little Greek bar in Alexandria, we managed to put away more than a quart of *ouzo* in a couple of hours, and when a couple of Egyptian footpads tried to take us in the street, he mopped up on both of them while I was still trying to get up from their first rush. He could really hold his liquor in those days. I wonder what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Lord Darcy asked.

"Well, he only had a few drinks yesterday, but he was pretty well under the weather last night. Passed out while I was talking to him."

The Roman Praefect jumped on that. "Then you *were* the last to see him?"

Zeisler blinked. "I don't know. I think somebody else went in to see if he was all right. I don't remember who."

Praefect Cesare sighed. "Very well, gentlemen. Thank you. Go to your compartment. I will call for you later."

"Just one more question, if I may," Lord Darcy said mildly. "Commander Zeisler, you said that the late Peabody worked with Ship's Security. He was, I believe, the officer who reported Captain Jourdan's—er—liaison with a certain unsavory young woman from Messina, thereby ruining the captain's career?" It was a shot in the dark, and Darcy knew it, but his intuition told him he was right.

Zeisler's lips firmed. He said nothing.

"Come, come, Commander; we can always check the records, you know."

"Yes," Zeisler said after a moment. "That's true."

"Thank you. That's all for now."

When they had gone, Praefect Cesare slumped down in his seat. "Well. It looks as though Praefect Angelo Ratti will have the honor of making the arrest, after all."

"You despair of solving the case already?" Lord Darcy asked.

"Oh, not at all. The case is already solved, Reverend Sir. But I cannot make an arrest."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, my dear Praefect."

A rather sardonic twinkle came into the Italian's eyes. "Ah, then you have not seen the solution to our problem, yet? You do not see how Commander Peabody came to be the *late* Commander Peabody?"

"I'm not the investigating officer here," Lord Darcy pointed out. "You are. What happened, in your view?"

"Well," Cesare said seriously, "what do we have here? We have twelve naval officers going to the funeral of a beloved late Captain. Also, a thirteenth—the man who betrayed that same Captain and brought him to disgrace. A Judas.

"We know they are lying when they tell us that their conversations with him last night were just casual. They could have spoken to him at any time during the day, yet none of them did. They waited until night. Then each of them, one at a time, goes to see him. Why? No reason is given. They claim it was for a casual chat. At that hour of night? After every one of them had been up since early morning? A casual chat! Do you believe that, Reverend Sir?"

Lord Darcy shook his head slowly. "No. We both know better. Every one of them was—and still is—lying."

"Very well, then. What are they lying about? What are they trying to cover up? Murder, of course."

"But, by which one of 'em?" Master Sean asked.

"Don't you see?" The Praefect's voice was low and tense. "Don't you see? It was *all* of them!"

"What?" Master Sean stared. "But—"

"Hold, Master Sean," Lord Darcy said. "I think I see where he's going. Pray continue, Praefect Cesare."

"Certainly you see it, Father," the Praefect said. "Those men probably don't consider it murder. It was, to them, an execution after a drumhead court-martial. One of them—we don't know who—talked his way into Peabody's compartment. Then, when the opportunity presented itself, he struck. Peabody was knocked unconscious. Then, one at a time, each of the others went in and struck again. A dozen men, a dozen blows. The deed is done, and no single one of them did it. It was execution by a committee—or rather, by a jury.

"They claim they did not know Peabody was coming along. But does that hold water? Was he on this train, in this car, by coinci-

dence? That stretches coincidence too far, I think."

"I agree," Lord Darcy said quietly. "It was no coincidence that put him on this train with the others. It was very carefully managed."

"Ah! You see, Master Sean?" Then a frown came over Sarto's face. "It is obvious what happened, but we have no solid proof. They stick to their story too well. We need *proof*—and we have none."

"I don't think you'll get any of them to confess," Lord Darcy said. "Do you, Master Sean?"

"No," said the sorcerer. "Not a chance."

"What we need," Lord Darcy said, "is *physical* proof. And the only place we'll find that is in Compartment Number One."

"We've searched that," Praefect Cesare said.

"Then let us search it again."

XX

Lord Darcy went over the body very carefully this time, his lean, strong fingers probing, feeling. He checked the lining of the jacket, his fingertips squeezing everywhere, searching for lumps or the crackle of paper. Nothing. He took off the wide belt, looking for hidden pockets. Nothing. He checked the boot heels. Nothing.

Finally he pulled off the calf-length boots themselves.

And, with a murmur of satisfaction, he withdrew an object from a flat interior pocket of the right one.

It was a flat, slightly curved silver badge engraved with the double-headed eagle of the Imperium. Set in it was what looked like a dull, translucent, grayish, cabochon-cut piece of glass. But all three men knew that if Peabody's living flesh had touched that gem, it would have glowed like a fire-ruby.

"A King's Messenger," the Praefect said softly.

No one else's touch would make that gem glow. The spell, invented by Master Sorcerer Sir Edward Elmer back in the thirties, had never been solved, and no one knew what sorcerer at present had charge of that secret and made these badges for the King.

This particular badge would never glow again.

"Indeed," Lord Darcy said. "Now we know what Commander Peabody has been doing since he retired from the Navy, and how he managed to retire honorably at such an early age."

"I wonder if his shipmates know," Sarto said.

"Probably not," Lord Darcy said. "King's Messengers don't ad-

vertise the fact."

"No. But I don't see that identifying him as such gets us any further along."

"We haven't searched the rest of the room thoroughly yet."

Twenty minutes later, Praefect Cesare said: "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And we've searched everywhere. What are you looking for, anyway?"

"I'm not sure," Lord Darcy admitted, "but I know it exists. Still, it might have ended up on the track with the compartment key. Hmmm." With his keen eyes, he surveyed the room carefully. Then he stopped, looking at the area just above the bed where the body lay. "Of course," he said very softly. "The upper berth."

The upper berth was folded up against the wall and locked firmly in place, making a large compartment that held mattress and bedclothes safely out of the way.

"Get Fred," Lord Darcy said. "He has a key."

Fred, indeed, had a key, and he had been using it. The beds were all made in the other compartments, the lowers changed to sofas and the uppers folded up and locked.

He couldn't understand why the gentlemen wanted that upper berth unlocked, but he didn't argue. He reached up, inserted the key, turned, and lowered the shelf until it was horizontal, all the time doing his best to keep his eyes off the thing that lay in the lower berth.

"Ahh! What have we here?" There was pleasure in Lord Darcy's voice as he picked up the large leather case from where it lay in the upper berth. Then he looked at Fred. "That'll be all for now, Fred; we'll call you when it's time to lock up again."

"Certainly, Father." He went on about his business.

Not until then did his lordship turn the seventeen-by-twelve-by-three leather envelope over. It bore the Royal Emblem, stamped in gold, just beneath the latch.

"Uh-oh!" said Master Sean. "More here than we thought." He looked at Lord Darcy. "Did you expect a diplomatic pouch, Father?"

"Not really. An envelope of some kind. King's Messengers usually carry messages, and this one would probably not be verbal. But this is heavy. Must weigh five or six pounds. The latch has been unlocked and not relocked. I'll wager that means *two* keys on the railroad track." He opened it and lifted out a heavy manuscript. He leafed through it.

"What is it?" Cesare Sarto asked.



"A treaty. In Greek, Latin, and Anglo-French. Between Roumeleia and the Empire." There was a jerkiness in his voice.

Master Sean opened his mouth to say something and then clamped it shut.

Lord Darcy slid the manuscript back into the big leather envelope and clicked the latch shut. "This is not for our eyes, gentlemen. But now we have our evidence. I can tell you exactly how John Peabody died and prove it. You can make your arrest very soon, Praefect."

XXI

There were seventeen men in the observation car of the *Napoli Express* as she rumbled southeast, along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, toward the mouth of the Tiber.

Besides the twelve naval officers, Praefect Cesare, Master Sean, and Lord Darcy, there were also Fred, the day attendant, and Trainmaster Edmund Norton, who had been asked to attend because it was, after all, his train, and therefore his responsibility.

Praefect Cesare Sarto stood near the closed door to the observation deck at the rear of the car, looking at sixteen pairs of eyes, all focused on him. Like an actor taking his stage, the Praefect knew not only the plot, but his lines and blocking.

Father Armand was at his left, seated at the end of the couch. Fred was behind the bar. The Trainmaster was seated at the passageway end of the bar. Master Sean was standing at the entrance to the passageway. The navy men were all seated. The stage was set.

"Gentlemen," he began, "we have spent many hours trying to discover and sift the facts pertaining to the death of your former shipmate, Commander John Peabody. Oh, yes, Captain Sir Stanley, I know who you all are. You and your fellow officers have consistently lied to me and evaded the truth, thus delaying our solution of this deadly puzzle. But we know, now.

"First, we know that the late commander was an official Messenger for His Imperial Majesty, John of England. Second, we know that he was the man who reported to higher authority what he knew about the late Captain Nicholas Jourdan's inamorata, certain facts which his own investigations, as a Ship's Security officer, had brought out. These facts resulted in Captain Jourdan's forced retirement, and, possibly, in his ultimate demise."

His eyes searched their faces. They were all waiting, and there was an undercurrent of hostility in their expressions.

"Third, we know how John Peabody was killed, and we know by whom it was done. Your cover-up was futile, gentlemen. Shall I tell you what happened last night?"

They waited, looking steadily at him.

"John Peabody was a man with enormous resistance to the effects of alcohol, and yet he passed out last night. Not because of the alcohol, but because someone drugged one of his drinks. Even that he was able to fight off longer than was expected.

"Then, when Peabody was unconscious, a man carefully let himself into Peabody's compartment. He had no intent to kill; he wasn't even armed. He wanted to steal some very important papers which, as a King's Messenger, Peabody was carrying.

"But something went wrong. Peabody came out of his drugged stupor enough to realize what was going on. He made a grab for his silver-headed stick. The intruder got it first.

"Peabody was a strong man and a skillful fighter, even when drunk, as most of you know. In the struggle that ensued, the intruder used that stick as a club, striking Peabody again and again. Drugged and battered, that tough, brave man kept fighting.

"Neither of them yelled or screamed: Peabody because it was not in his nature to call for help; the intruder because he wanted

no alarm.

"At last, the blows took their final toll. Peabody collapsed, his head smashed in. He was dying.

"The intruder listened. No alarm had been given. He still had time. He found the heavy diplomatic pouch in which those important documents were carried. But what could he do with them? He couldn't stop to read them there, for Tonio, the night man, might be back very soon. Also, he could not carry them away, because the pouch was far too large to conceal on his person, and if Tonio saw it, he would report it when the body was found.

"So he concealed it in the upper berth of Peabody's compartment, thinking to retrieve it later. Then he took Peabody's key, locked the compartment, tossed the key off the train, and went on about his business. He hoped he would have plenty of time, because the body should not have been found until about an hour ago.

"But Peabody, though dying, was not dead yet. Scalp wounds have a tendency to bleed profusely, and in this case, they certainly did. The blood pooled on the floor and ran out under the door.

"Tonio found the blood—and the rest you know.

"No, gentlemen, this was not a vengeance killing as we thought at first. This was done by a man whom we believe to be an agent of, or in the pay of the *Serka*—the Polish Secret Service."

They were no longer looking at Cesare Sarto, they were looking at each other.

Sarto shook his head. "No; wrong again, gentlemen. *Only one man had the key to that upper berth last night!*" He lifted his eyes and looked at the bar.

"Trainmaster Edmund Norton," he said coldly, "you are under arrest!"

The Trainmaster was already on his feet, and he turned to run up the passageway. If he could get to the door and lock these men in—

But stout little Master Sean O Lochlainn was blocking his way.

Norton was bigger and heavier than the sorcerer, but Norton had only seconds; no time for a fight. From somewhere, he produced a six-inch knife and made an underhand thrust.

Master Sean's right hand made a single complex gesture.

Norton froze, immobile for a long second.

Then, like a large red-and-blue sack of wet oatmeal, he collapsed to the deck. Master Sean took the knife from his nerveless

fingers as he fell.

"I didn't want him to fall on the knife and hurt himself," he explained, almost apologetically. "He'll come around all right when I take that spell off."

The Navy men were all on their feet, facing Master Sean.

Commander Hauser fingered his streaked beard. "I didn't know a sorcerer could do anything like that," he said in a hushed, almost frightened voice.

"It can't be done at all unless a sorcerer is attacked," Master Sean explained. "All my spell did was turn his own psychic energy back on itself. Gave his nervous system a devil of a shock when the flow was forcibly reversed. It's similar to certain forms of unarmed combat, where the opponent's own force is used against him. If he doesn't attack you, there's not much you can do."

The Roman Praefect walked over to where the Trainmaster lay, took out a pair of handcuffs, and locked Norton's wrists behind his back. "Fred, you had best go get the Assistant Trainmaster; he'll have to take over now. And tell the Master-at-Arms who is waiting at the far end of the passageway to come on in. I want him to take charge of the prisoner now. Captain Sir Stanley, Commander Hauser, do you mind if I borrow Compartment Eight until we get to Rome? Good. Help me get him in there."

The Assistant Trainmaster came back with Fred, and the Praefect explained things to him. He looked rather dazed, but he took charge competently enough.

Behind the bar, Fred still looked shocked. "Here, Fred," the Praefect said, "you need some work to do. Give a drink to anyone who wants one, and have a good stiff one yourself."

"How did you know it wasn't *me* who unlocked that upper berth last night?" Fred whispered.

"For the same reason I knew no one in the other cars on this train did it," Cesare whispered back. "The dining car was locked, and you do not have a key. Tonio did, but he had no key to the berth. Only the Trainmaster has *all* the keys to this train. Now make those drinks."

There were sixteen drinks to serve; Fred went about his work.

Boothroyd smoothed down his white hair. "Just when did the Trainmaster drug Peabody's drink, anyway?"

Master Sean took the question. "Last night, after we left Marseille, when Norton sent Tonio off on an errand. He told Tonio to get some towels, but those towels wouldn't be needed until this

morning. Tonio would have had plenty of time to get them after we retired. But Peabody was drinking, and Norton wanted to have the chance to drug him. I've seen how easy it is for a barman to slip something into a drink unnoticed." He did not look at Zeisler.

Sir Stanley cleared his throat. "You said we were all lying, Praefect, that our cover-up was futile. What did you mean by that?"

Lord Darcy had already told Sarto to take credit for everything because "it would be unseemly for a man of the cloth to be involved in such things." So Cesare Sarto wisely did not mention *whose* deductions he was expounding.

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Captain. You and your men did *not* go into Peabody's compartment, one at a time, for a 'friendly chat.' You each had something specific to say to the man who turned in Captain Jourdan. Want to tell me what it was?"

"Might as well, eh? Very well. We were pretty certain he'd been avoiding us because he thought we hated him. We didn't. Not his fault, you see. He did his duty when he reported what he knew about that Sicilian woman. Any one of us would have done the same. Right, Commander?"

"Damn right," said Commander Hauser. "Would've done it myself. Some of us older officers told the captain she was no good for him from the start, but he wouldn't listen. If he was broken-hearted, it was mostly because she'd made a proper fool of him, and no mistake."

Captain Sir Stanley took up the story again. "So that's what we went in there for, one at a time. To tell him we didn't hold it against him. Even Lieutenant Jamieson, eh, my boy?"

"Aye, sir. I didn't like him, but it wasn't for that reason."

The Praefect nodded. "I believe you. But that's where the cover-up came in. *Each and every one of you was afraid that one of your group had killed Peabody!*"

There was silence. The silence of tacit assent.

"I watched you, listened to you," the Praefect went on. "Each of you considered the other eleven one by one, and came up with a verdict of 'innocent' every time. But that doubt remained. And you were afraid that I would find a motive in what Peabody did three years ago. So you told me nothing. I must confess that, because of that evasion, that lying, I was suspicious at one time of all of you."

"By S'n George! Then what made you begin to suspect that Nor-

ton was guilty, sir?" asked Lieutenant Valentine Herrick.

"When it was reported to me that the Trainmaster showed up within half a minute after he had been sent for, right after Tonio found the blood. Norton had been awake since three o'clock yesterday morning: what was he still doing up, in full uniform at nearly one o'clock this morning? Why hadn't he turned things over to the Assistant Trainmaster, as usual, and gone to sleep long before? That's when I began to wonder."

Lieutenant Lyman Vandepole ran a finger over his hairline mustache. "But until you found that pouch, you couldn't be sure, could you, sir?"

"Not certain, no. But if one of you had gone in there with deliberate murder on his mind, he'd most likely have brought his own weapon. Or, if he intended to use that sword-stick, he would have used the blade, since every one of you knew it was a sword-stick. But Norton didn't, you see."

Senior Lieutenant Simon Lamar looked at "Father Armand." "With all that fighting going on next door, I've surprised it didn't wake you up, Reverend Sir."

"I'm sure it would have," Lord Darcy said. "That is how we were able to pinpoint *when* it happened. Tonio left the car to go forward about midnight. At that time, Master Seamus and I were out on the rear platform. I was having a smoke, and he was keeping me company. We went back to our compartment at twenty after twelve. Norton didn't know we were out there, of course, but the killing must have taken place during that twenty minutes. Which means that the murder took place *before* we reached the Italian border, and Norton will have to be extradited to Provence."

Fred began serving the drinks he had mixed, but before anyone could taste his, Captain Sir Stanley Galbraith said: "A moment, gentlemen, if you please. I would like to propose a toast. Remember, we will have another funeral to attend after the one in Napoli."

When Fred had finished serving, he stood respectfully to one side, his own drink in his hand. The others rose.

"Gentlemen," said the Captain, "I give you Commander John Wycliffe Peabody, who did his duty as he saw it and died honorably in the service of his King."

They drank in silence.

§ § §

XXII

By twenty minutes after one that afternoon, the *Napoli Express* was twelve miles out of Rome, moving on the last leg of her journey to Napoli.

Lôrd Darcy and Master Sean were in their compartment, quietly relaxing after an excellent lunch.

"Me lord," said the sorcerer, "are you sure it was right to turn those copies of the treaty over to the Praefecture of Police for delivery to Imperial Naval Intelligence?"

"It was perfectly safe."

"Well, what's the use of our carrying our copies all the way to Athens, then?"

"My dear Sean, the stuff Peabody was carrying was a sham. I looked it over carefully. One of the provisions, for instance, is that a joint Anglo-French-Greek naval base shall be established at 29° 51' North, 12° 10' East."

"What's wrong with that, me lord?"

"Nothing, except that it is in the middle of the Sahara Desert."

"Oh."

"Kyril's signature was a forgery. It was signed in Latin characters, and the Basileus reads and writes only Greek. The Greek and Latin texts do not agree with each other, nor with the Anglo-French. In one place in the Greek text, the city of Constantinople is referred to as the capital of England, while Paris is given as the capital of Greece. I could go on. The whole thing is a farrago of nonsense."

"But—*why*?"

"One can only conjecture, of course. I believe he was a decoy. Think about it. Sixteen men all about to go to a funeral, and, at the last minute, four of them have their leaves canceled. Why? I feel the Royal touch of His Majesty's hand in there. I think it was to make certain Peabody got aboard that train with his fellow officers. It would look like a cover, as though he, too, were going to Jourdan's funeral.

"I think what happened was this: His Majesty found that the *Serka* had somehow gotten wind of our naval treaty with Roumeleia. But they didn't know it was being signed by Prince Richard as proxy in Rouen, so they started tracing it in London. So His Majesty had this utterly nonsensical pseudo-treaty drawn up and sent in with Peabody. He was a decoy."

"Did Peabody know that?" Master Sean asked.

"Highly unlikely. If a man knows he is a decoy, he tends to *act*

like a decoy, which ruins the illusion. No, he didn't know. Would he have fought to the death to preserve a phony document? Of course, being an honorable officer, once that pouch was locked, he would not have opened it, so he did not know its contents."

"But, me lord! If he was supposed to be a decoy, if he was supposed to lead *Serka* agents off on a wild goose chase somewhere else while you and I got the real thing safely to Athens—*why was the decoy dumped practically in our laps?*"

"I think," said his lordship with care, "that we missed connections somewhere. Other transportation may have—*must* have—been provided for us. But something must have gone awry.

"Nonetheless, my dear Sean, all will work out for the best. A murder aboard the *Napoli Express* will certainly hit the news services, but the story will be so confused that *Serka* won't be able to figure out what happened until too late."

"It would have been even worse confused if Cesare had come out with his conspiracy theory," the magician said. "He's a good man at his job, but he don't know people."

"His problem," Lord Darcy said, "is that he happens to be a master at paper work. On paper, he can spot a conspiracy two leagues away. But sentences on paper do not convey the nuances of thought that spoken words do. A conspiracy is easy to concoct if it involves only paper work, and it takes an expert to find it. But you, as a sorcerer, and I, as a criminal investigator, know that a group of human beings simply can't hold a conspiracy together that long."

"Aye, me lord," the stout little Irishman agree. "I'm glad you stopped me. I almost told Cesare to his face that his theory was all foolishness. Why, that bunch would have given it away before they finished the job. Can you imagine Zeisler tryin' to keep his mouth shut about somethin' like that? Or young Jamieson not breaking down?"

Lord Darcy shook his head. "The whole group couldn't even hide the fact that they were doing something perfectly innocent like assuring an old comrade that they did not think ill of him. Even more ridiculous than that is the notion that any such group would pick a train to commit their murder on, a place where, to all intents and purposes, they would be trapped for hours. Those men are not stupid; they're trained naval officers. They'd either have killed Peabody in Paris or waited until they got to Napoli. They still couldn't have held their conspiracy together, but they would have thought they had a better chance."

"Still and all," Master Sean said staunchly, "Cesare Sarto is a good investigator."

"I must agree with you there," said Lord Darcy. "He has the knack of finding answers even when you don't want him to."

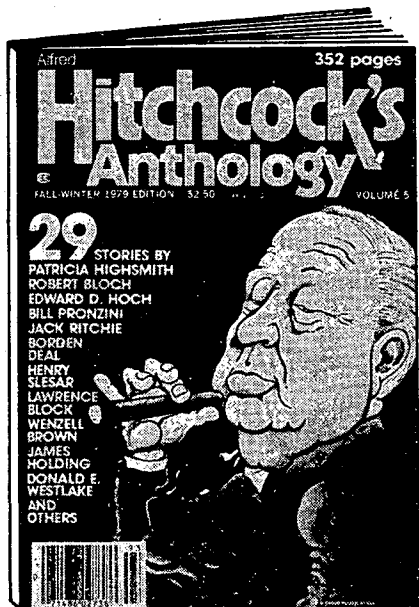
"How do you mean, me lord?"

"As he and Praefect Angelo were taking Norton away, he offered his hand and thanked me. I said the usual things. I said I hoped I'd see him again. He shook his head. 'I am afraid,' he said, 'that I shall never see Father Armand Brun again. But I hope to meet Lord Darcy some day.'"

Master Sean nodded silently.

The train moved on toward Napoli.

IT'S HERE and we apologize— for all the discomfort these 29 spine-chilling tales will cause you. This fifth anthology captures at least one story from each of the first eighteen years of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (1956-1973).**



buying this paperback edition instead of its hardbound version.

You'll not only enjoy these great stories, you'll appreciate the \$7.45 you save by

**To: ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S ANTHOLOGY
380 Lexington Avenue, NY NY 10017**

☐ **YES! Send me ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S ANTHOLOGY Vol. 5, Fall/Winter '79 edition. I enclose \$2.50 plus 65¢ handling/shipping (total of \$3.15).**

Name (please print) _____

Address _____ **Apt. No.** _____

City _____

State _____ **Zip** _____

SFAN2

Hi! If you're looking for no-nonsense

SCIENCE fiction



my new magazine has it. Founded a little over two years ago, it presents hard-core SF the way it used to be written: crisp, clean, scientifically accurate and sometimes totally whimsical. We started out a quarterly and this year we became a monthly—thanks to a lot of appreciative SF readers. Below is an easy way for you to get to know us. Yes, please start my subscription to

EXTRA
COUPON
ON PAGE 2

PLEASE ALLOW 4 TO 6 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY OF FIRST ISSUE.

Isaac ASIMOV'S

SCIENCE
FICTION
MAGAZINE

Box 1855 GPO,
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10001

☐ Enclosed is \$7.50 for 6 issues
(outside USA & poss. \$8.50)

☐ Enclosed is \$15.00 for 12 issues (1 year)
(outside USA & poss. \$17.00)

I prefer to use my MASTER CHARGE or VISA credit card. HOWEVER, only these longer terms are available:

☐ 1 year (12 issues) \$15.00 ☐ 2 years (24 issues) \$29.00

Credit card #

Expiration date

Signature

Name

Address

City

State

Zip

H9H049

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Subscribe to Dr. Asimov's magazine —

**The good doctor
Asimov will keep
you thoroughly in touch,
issue after issue.**



**NO POSTAGE
NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES**

BUSINESS REPLY MAIL

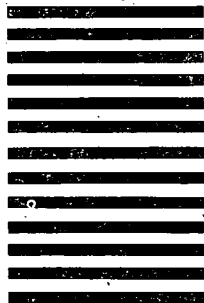
**FIRST CLASS PERMIT NO. 1050
NEW YORK, N.Y.**

POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY

**Isaac
Asimov's**

**SCIENCE FICTION
MAGAZINE**

**P.O. BOX 1855 GPO
NEW YORK, NY 10001**



**LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED**